

## Review

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### **A world without email**

Newport C., Penguin Random House, New York, NY, 2021. 320 pp. Type: Book

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Intellectual work draws a lot from communication between collaborating parties. Speed and ease of communication have enormously improved--both qualitatively and quantitatively--in the course of the last decades. So, how come the day-to-day life of intellectual workers (be it in corporate settings or in academic environments) amounts to so much stress?

Cal Newport wrote this book based on what he terms "the hyperactive hive mind": given the ease with which haphazard, unstructured communications flow into our different inboxes every day, with thematically unrelated requests, questions, opinions, personal issues, and so on, our slightly evolved primate brains deal very badly with context switching, and we tend to lose cognitive focus of what we were working on--taking a heavy toll on our concentration, and needing time to go back to our original topic at hand ("the sequential brain in a parallel world," as the author presents it). Not only that, Newport cites ample anthropological studies on many tribes of smaller-scale societies that could be likened to our workplaces in scale, and found out the importance of not leaving social cues unanswered: our species' brains get naturally anguished at the prospect of others thinking their communications are not very important to us, that we have mail pending to be read or answered. That, plus being forced to lose the non-written component of communication while within the reach of our brains, stresses them (as we have coped with written language for less than 5000 years).

Newport goes through the promises of email when first introduced to office work, in the 1990s, including quotes such as "A cornerstone of our business is the quicker you get information, the quicker you can use it, and e-mail has already given us an edge" (Mike Simpson, 1989) and the realization that email can replace telephone calls and relay information to many people simultaneously, creating thematic threads. Email brought high-speed asynchronous communication--people no longer needed to be available to receive other people's communication, and they could answer to it when their time allowed. The problem is this had hidden costs, as office workers started behaving as distributed systems; asynchronous communication complicates attempts to coordinate and introduces a deluge of messages that can drown meaning in noise.

For the second part of the book, Newport identifies four closely related principles to reorganize our work:

- The attention capital principle, presenting various examples of ideas that allow people (be they knowledge workers or mechanical workers) to better keep their attention focused on the task at hand, to make production more efficient;
- The process principle, insisting we think about outputs of knowledge work as processes much like those from industrial work, and introducing smart, friction-free processes that don't require explicit communications to guide our production flows;
- The protocol principle, presenting a case for having rules to help coordinate interactions in the workplace (meeting scheduling, office hours, and rules for interactions with clients); and
- The specialization principle, suggesting we reverse the trend started by the personal computer revolution, in the 1980s, that every knowledge worker can do a myriad of unrelated things aided by their powerful computers--in the knowledge sector, working on fewer things, but doing each with more quality and accountability, can be the foundation for significantly more productivity.

The book is, overall, a very interesting read, at a quite easy-to-read pace. The examples Newport draws from are varied, covering the Paleolithic, the High Middle Ages, the Industrial Revolution, and contemporary times. He presents important methodologies such as agile, Kanban, extreme programming, and Scrum. If anything, however, the tools remind me more of a book published ten years ago, not in 2021--although Newport does have many success stories of companies who have adopted these systems.

My main quibble with this book, however, is the blurring of a very important word, the word that defines the book itself: email. The book is centered on email, but only (or mostly) as an office coordination medium. It barely mentions email's many uses for discussion and design work, so common in global collaborative teams; it does not mention the importance of email both to individuals and to organizations as a historical memory--oftentimes said memories are not important, true, but I happen to be involved in several projects where referring back to decisions made over email lists years ago is a very common practice.

The book is also very blurry when covering two quite distinct communication media: email and instant messenger. While many people use them interchangeably, I cannot view this practice as anything other than a lack of familiarity with the tools. Although email and instant messenger share the property of being technologies that interrupt too much, their interaction patterns and the division of participants in both is so big that I feel this was a missed opportunity where the book could have dug deeper and even taken advantage of the differences between said tools.

Naturally, this is not a technical book. It is meant for practitioners trying to improve management, either of themselves or in their work environments. I did enjoy it, and do recommend it, though keep in mind the caveats expressed above.

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Reviewer: Gunnar Wolf

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