You may find this hard to believe, but 60 songs that explain the 90s, America's favorite poorly named music podcast is back with 30 more songs than 120 songs total. I'm your host Rob Harvilla, here to bring you more shrewd musical analysis, poignant nostalgic reveries, crude personal anecdotes, and rad special guests, all with even less restraint than usual. Join us once more on 60 songs that explain the 90s every Wednesday on Spotify.

Today is the second episode in our series about work. Our first episode a few weeks ago was about the science of procrastination and how to overcome the natural forces of delay. Today's episode is about how in a fantastic ironic twist, our productivity technology, email, Slack, consistently gets in the way of our actual productivity. Or in other words, how the digital workplace broke our brains. Calvin Newport is a computer science professor at Georgetown University.

He is the author of, among other books, Deep Work and A World Without Email. And at the heart of so much of Newport's work is this incredibly rich mystery. Given everything we know or everything we think we know about creativity, genius, shouldn't the internet have made us more creative? Shouldn't the internet have produced more genius? We have no shortage of digital tools that make it quick and easy to write, draw, illustrate, save, organize, share ideas. But email and Slack and IM and these workflow and project management tools so often create so many parallel stimuli begging for our attention that it makes it harder to actually do stuff. As the New York Times recently put it, quote, something in the great digital workplace experiment has gone terribly wrong, end quote. The average white collar worker that is someone in marketing, advertising, social media, finance, tech, news media now spends up to 60% of the work week engaged in communications. More than half the week. In a recent survey, Microsoft found that video meetings now take up so much of the day for the typical Microsoft worker that a significant share of their workforce is now logging in online to finish their actual non-email work, their non-meeting work between 9pm and 10 or 11pm, right, as if like the 9 to 10 is the new 9 to 5. In response to this relentless need to loop back and loop back and meet and zoom and team and meet and zoom and email, Newport came up with what he called the deep work hypothesis. He said, if you want to learn something, something hard, something complicated, you have to focus intensely without distraction.

Doing this even three hours a day, five days a week, just uninterrupted, carefully directed concentration, that is enough to make someone incredibly productive. That's a remarkable acknowledgment or theory, the idea that a well-constructed 15-hour work week is enough to make you a star. The problem is that the ability to perform that kind of deep, focused work is becoming rare at the exact same time that it's probably becoming more valuable than ever in our economy. So in this conversation, we talk about deep work versus shallow work, how our productivity tools make us less productive, and how the digital workplace broke our brains and how we can unbreak them. I'm Derek Thompson. This is plain English.

Cal Newport, welcome to the podcast. Derek, it's my pleasure.

For those who don't know you, who are you and what do you write about?

This sounds like a Gauguin painting. Where am I from? Where am I going?
I'm a computer science professor at Georgetown University. I also do quite a bit of public facing writing about technology and its impact on various parts of our world. So you may know some of my books such as Deep Work, Digital Minimalism in a World Without Email. I'm also on the contributing staff of The New Yorker where I cover the same general beat tech and the different ways tech intersects with our lives. Before we get to your diagnosis of the state of the digital workplace, I want to know a little bit about how a productivity expert structures their workday. So you are a professor, which I imagine includes teaching, responsibilities and research and administrative duties. You are, as you said, a New Yorker writer. You're a book writer. You're a husband. You're a father. I know it might seem like I'm kind of putting the cart before the horse here by asking you to disclose the medicine before we discuss the disease of our harried minds, but what is notable about your workday, the way you work, that you think most listeners who do, let's call it, laptop work like you, might find your strategy distinctive?
And I'll preface the description of what I do. I'll preface it with just the explanation. So what is the connection between what I just said, which is I write about technology, its impact on our world, and productivity. It's because one of the biggest impacts of technology in our world in the last, let's say, decade and a half has actually been the way that new technologies in the workplace and new technologies in our personal life distract us, exhaust us and keep us away from
being able to do work that we love. So I'm a computer scientist who, why do I talk about productivity? Because when you study technology and its impact, you can't get away from the way technology seems to pull on our attention, the way technology seems to try to destabilize our ability to do good work. So that's what led me to the productivity world. So then what do I do? Well, I'm a big believer in what I call multi-scale planning, which at its core is all about having some intention and control about where your time goes. So what it's what it's rejecting is the reactive approach, which right now has become the default, but has become more of a default in the last 15 years than it ever was before, because distracting technologies push us into a mode of reactivity. What's in my inbox? What's on my Slack? What's on my phone? What can I do in the moment? What message can I send? What thing can I respond to? I reject that, and the way I try to reject that is through multi-scale planning. So you start at a, let's say the scale of a semester or the scale of a quarter. If you're not in an academic context and say, okay, I want a plan, what am I doing this summer? Or I want a plan, what are the big things I'm working on for this fall? You then use that strategic plan, quarterly plan, semester plan, whatever you want to call it. You look at that at the next scale, which is weekly. So it's beginning of every week. You say, okay, let me look at that big picture plan. Use that to help inform a plan I'm going to make for the week ahead. And now you're actually looking at your concrete calendar. What is scheduled? Tuesday is busy on teaching. I've got these meetings. Thursday is pretty open before noon. So that might be a good day to whatever catch up on your manuscript, whatever it happens to be. So you're looking at your concrete calendar, you create a plan for the week. So I'll actually usually type this out, plain text file, nothing fancy. Then you use your weekly plan when you get to the scale of the day, and you make a plan for each day where you now consult that weekly plan. And when you're planning at the scale of the day, I like to do what I call time blocking, where I actually look at the available hours during my work

day, and I block them off. Okay, this hour I'm working on this, this specific half hour I'm doing that. All right, for this two hour stretch here, I'm going to work on this project. So it's actually giving every minute of your day a job, as opposed to going into your day and saying, what should I work on next? Who needs me? I'm a little bit exhausted. So let me load up the inbox real quick or something like this. So at all scales, we're talking from semester down the weekly, down the daily, each scale informs the next. And the whole idea behind all of this is, I'm trying to give my time a mission. I'm trying to look at my time and say, what's the best thing to do with this? What's the best way to make use of this? It's active instead of reactive. And that's the backbone of how I approach and try to balance all this different work.

That's so interesting, this concept of fractally scheduling your time. And when you were mentioning the idea that the laptop and the phone screen can trigger this sense of reactivity, I mean, that really struck a chord with me. There have been so many times where I'll sit down, and I think I know what I want to accomplish at my desk on that morning. But then email is shouting and Twitter is shouting and LinkedIn is shouting and Slack is shouting. And then, of course, I should probably check the news and maybe I should listen to that podcast and oh, that article or that tweet, you know, launched a tab, which launched a tab, which launched a tab, that reactivity of the internet to use some of your language essentially schedules our time for us. And you're saying, if you pre-schedule your time before you reach the computer, you can ward off, you can foreclose the possibility of being scheduled by these sort of screaming devices. I think the best way to begin to talk about your diagnosis of why the digital workplace has broken is to draw up a term from your book, a world without email. And that term is the hyperactive hive mind workflow. Tell us what that term is referring to. What is the hyperactive hive mind workflow?

Yeah, this is what's critical about what we were just talking about is that in 1992, if you said, I'm just going to show up at my office and I will let the day unfold as it unfolds, you would actually probably be okay. I mean, there is some distractions, you might spend some more time at the coffee, you know, the coffee carothe you might want to, but ultimately say, like, I don't have much to do here sitting on my desk. All right, let me pull something out, let me work on it. It's really more of a contemporary issue that now we have all these different sources pulling at our attention that if you just approach your day saying, what do I want to work on next, you can actually lose your whole day. And the hyperactive hive mind is why. So that's my name. I'm putting a name on something that was before not named, but it is implicitly the way we have decided in laptop work to use your term to collaborate and coordinate our efforts. And the hyperactive hive mind says we have these low friction digital communication tools. So at first it was email, then we get Slack and Teams, but it's all the same idea, low friction digital communication tools. Let's just work things out on the fly. So if I need something from someone, I'll just shoot them a message, we'll go back and forth. Hey, what time is this meeting? Do you know about this? Hey, what's going on with this client that just called? We'll figure things out with back and forth, unscheduling ad hoc message. And that's called the hyperactive hive mind. That's the name I gave to it. Now it's a very natural mode of collaboration if you're in a small group of people. I mean, it's how a small group of people in the same physical location, that's how they would coordinate themselves. I would just talk to you, you would talk to me, we'd go back and forth ad hoc. Digital communication like email or Slack

made it possible to scale that up to lots of people, to whole organizations, the people who are spread out over many different locations. And my argument is that this implicit decision we made to switch to the hyperactive hive mind is at the core of many woes and modern knowledge work. Having to maintain all of these ongoing back and forth conversations requires that we have to keep monitoring these communication channels. I do not have the ability to say, let me wait till three o'clock to check my inbox for the first time, if there's 12 conversations going on. And some of these conversations might have to have four or five back and forths to reach a decision. And that decision has to be reached today. And so I have to keep monitoring my inbox to see when your next message comes in, because I got to volley that back over the proverbial net pretty quickly, because we have to get this back and forth four or five times to reach a decision by close of business. And go one level deeper there. Why is this context switching between communications channels? You use email, then you go to Slack, then you go to Teams, then you go back to email, back to Slack, onto Twitter, back to LinkedIn. Why is that context switching bad for our productivity in a world where, as you said, we're knowledge workers and so much of knowledge work is talking to people. So what's the matter with this sort of digital workplace that we've built around us that takes these communications technologies and puts them at scale? Well, it's a human brain is the issue. There are devices that can switch back and forth between different types of operations with no problems, like a computer processor, for example. A computer processor is completely agnostic to what operation is executing at the moment. It doesn't care what the last one was. It doesn't care what the next one is. It'll do it all at the same speed. But the human brain is very bad at this. So for the human brain to actually change its target of attention from one topic to another, this can be a 10, 15, maybe 20 minute operation to completely finish. You have to, in a neurobiological sense, inhibit certain networks in the brain. You have to excite other networks in the brain. It takes time. And we can measure this in the lab. We can measure this with imaging. We can measure this with studies where they actually have people working on a task and then they interrupt them. So they have a confederate come in and say, in this particular experiment I'm thinking about, oh, you forgot to fill out this one form that was part of your experimental consent. And you can go back and see what does that do?

What does that do to their ability to finish the task that they're working on? All of these threads of evidence weave together into the same story, which is the brain takes a long time to switch attention from one thing to another. So if you're doing once every six minutes, trying to switch your attention to the grab bag of highly salient distractions that's represented by an inbox, and then back to an article, back to something you're trying to write, back to a deep decision. And then after five minutes, you go back to that distracting inbox again, your brain becomes muddled. You're halfway through context shifts that you then abort and go back to the original, then abort before you're fully there and go back. And you end up in this intermediate in-between state where you feel that mental exhaustion. It's where you feel that resistance to doing more cognitive work. It's why you feel suddenly shut down or tired by 2 p.m. You find yourself just saying, I'm going to cherry pick through my inbox to find the easiest things in there to respond to because your brain actually can't do anything more demanding at that point. I don't know if you can answer this question, but there is a cliché that the internet makes us ADHD, that it takes what is a minority experience in terms of people having this hyperactive deficit

disorder and makes it a more common experience of being online. Do you have any idea or can you point to any research that suggests that what used to be considered a minority attention disorder is now a majority attention disorder because we are all electing to participate in a machine that is constantly forcing our attention to shift context in the way that you're describing? It's important to note here there's two different forces at play that have a similar outcome, but how they work is very different. We have the force of let's call this professional attention attractors. This is email, this is Slack. Then we have the force of what we can think of as attention economy attention attractors. This is social media, this is the web. Both of these things are very alluring, but they operate on different principles. These get muddled, so I'm going to pull them apart so that we can use this to help structure the conversation going forward. We're talking about the attention economy attractors. We're talking about TikTok or Twitter.

The attractiveness is engineered in. What you're dealing with here is a tool that has been engineered to try to get that ADHD style experience of grabbing your attention, pulling your attention back to it, then moving your attention very quickly to other things before you lose that engagement, before you lose that energy. There you're fighting a battle of engineered addictiveness in some sense.

The workplace attractors like email or Slack, well, these are not engineered.

The snag our attention. It's not a sort of algorithmic curation of engagement. The things that are at play here are much more, I would say, pragmatic and intersocial. It's just knowing, as a human being, knowing there's communication in this inbox that is part of ongoing conversations where other people I work with need me. They need me to answer this so they can get back to me, and we can figure something out. That is incredibly salient for much more deeper Paleolithic tribal reasons. We want to be there and be available to members of our tribe. We're very uncomfortable with the idea that someone needs us and that we're ignoring them. So we come back to the inbox less because we're addicted. We come back to the inbox less because we have bad habits or we just don't know about batching, but because there's an actual pragmatic imperative, which is this is full of ongoing conversations with people that you work with and care about who need you, and you need to service them. There there's actually pretty interesting data where you can break down, for example, people's stress responses to not checking their inbox. So the experiment I'm thinking about here, this would be Gloria Mark, and they had heart rate monitors. They might have used heat bloom cameras as well, and they could monitor also the computers. They could log how often they check an email, and they took the subject group and said, you have the batch. So wait whatever it was, four hours to check. This was very stressful. You could predict how stressful it was, though, depending on also how conscientious the person was, right? So based on the Big Five personality test, someone who actually was more conscientious, someone who was more wired to care about other people and what they thought of them had massive stress reactions, not checking their inbox, right? So we have these two different things going on. We have TikTok pulling out our attention because of the cybernetic algorithmic slot machine style engineered addictiveness, and then we have Slack pulling out our attention because there's a good reason for it. There's people in there who need us. The hyperactive hive mind is how we've decided to coordinate,

and so this is where the work is happening, and when you're not there, you're not being helpful. So same effect in both cases, this ADHD style constantly moving your attention, very different sources, and therefore very different prescriptions for what to do about it. Everything you set up to now creates a big fat mystery in my head. If these tools are so bad, why have our bosses, our companies, allowed us to use them? Why have the people in charge of productivity let this productivity toxin through the door? And I've read a bit of your work on this, I've read a bit of Drucker, and I want to propose a theory and let you play with it and maybe destroy it. The theory basically begins with this. Nobody knows the secret to great productive creative work. In manufacturing, we said, oh, the assembly line is more efficient than what came before it, and that was true. If you have someone who just defixes wheels and cars all day, that is much more efficient than what came before it, but when it comes to creative work, coming up with a great ad campaign, changing a website, building a fintech business, coming up with a great book idea, podcast outline, there are a million books out there about how to master creativity, but those million books are a million stabs in the dark. No one actually knows. So a lot of companies have defaulted to something like this. Creativity is teamwork and good teams share information. That is the thesis. Creativity is teamwork and good teams share information.
But from that starting point comes this other principle. Number one, creativity comes from teams. Number two, good teams share information. And number three, the more information shared, the better. And that is how we fucked ourselves. Because if companies subscribe to the more sharing is better principle, they'll welcome whatever technologies are most frictionless and fun to share information. So we get email and then text and then gchat replaces text and then slack replaces email. And before you know it, this assumption that information sharing is at the core of creativity ultimately and ironically leads to a world that is so overrun with information sharing that it becomes the enemy of creativity. Is there anything there in that story that connects with you? Yeah. I mean, I think you're on to something there. I do see the introduction of this way of working was accidental. And I think it was unanticipated. Email was the first driver. So I go back in a world without email and I try to trace the corporate introduction of email. And you can see what it was introduced for. It was trying to replace existing things that are already happening with a cheaper, more flexible alternative. And it did. So it was voicemail systems within companies. Those were expensive and not the best way to actually communicate compared to email. And it was faxes. Actually, some of the driving force behind getting interoperable network standards across the country. So you could have computers in California talk to computers over in whatever New Jersey or something like this. One of the driving forces of getting some interoperable network standards was actually coming out of the aerospace industry and they're trying to get around faxes. So we need a way for these various far-flung buildings to be able to talk to each other, send files and stuff like that back and forth.
So it made complete sense. We didn't want interoffice memos. We didn't want voicemail. We didn't want to use fax machines. And email was a clearly superior alternative to each of those technologies. We brought it into the office to solve that problem. And it ushered in with it this new mode of collaboration where we talked more than ever before. And to me, one of the key case studies of this, and I talked about that in the email book as well, is IBM. So I tracked down and talked to this engineer who was involved with the IBM headquarters up in Armonk, New York when they built their first bespoke internal email system. They wrote it from scratch because

their IBM and it didn't exist. This was the early 80s. What was cool about this is that they had actually run a survey of all of the communication happening in the office because they had to know if all of this communication is happening in memos and voicemails, if all of that moves to email, we need a big enough server to handle that. So they figured out, okay, how much communication is happening. Let's be aggressive and assume that all this is going to move to email. And so they provisioned a server for that and it overloaded and melted down in three days. Because once they introduced the tool for email, the amount of communication that happened went up by a factor of five or 10. Because just having the tool there enabled this low friction back and forth communication. And I think what's going on here is that, look, energy wants to flow. We want to find low energy states. We want to find what's the lowest friction way of doing what we want to do. And in work, sending an email is definitely low friction. These tools that follow Slack, GChat, et cetera. I wrote a New Yorker piece about this once that said the headline was Slack invented the right tool for the wrong way to work. Because what happened was, is email taught us to do the hyperactive high find. Let's just figure things out on the fly. Once we were doing that, we realized, well, this is not the best tool, right? I mean, it's these messages, they're all in the same inbox. And so Slack and the other tools came along and said, well, if you're going to do the hyperactive high find, this is a much better interface. We should have different channels. We should keep a transcript of each of the different communications. You can go back and check it out. Back and forth in a common chat room is better than CC. So basically Slack was meant as a much better implementation of the hyperactive high find, which is why everyone has a split relationship with it. The hyperactive high find is terrible. But if you're using the hyperactive high find Slack is better than email. And I think that's why those tools really spread is because they implemented that workflow well. But the workflow is a problem. So I mean, I think it really is a almost like a techno determinist narrative that unfolded here. The technology changed work in ways that wasn't good for anybody and in ways that we weren't really predicting. This is not a good social construction technology case study of people using email and deploying it to their advantage versus others. The email basically took advantage of all of us. It changed the way we worked in a way that almost nobody is happy with. And it was unintentional, unexpected and almost instantaneous. The one thing I just want to add to what you said is that Slack is much more fun than email. That a part of what helped Slack win wasn't just that it helped to organize group conversations better than a typical sort of Gmail interface, but that it was fun. It had gifs. It allowed you to have reactions to things that people said. It felt, I mean, to my mind, much more like gossip in a weird way. It got closer to the feeling of gossiping with co-workers than just responding all and CCing and BCing, which doesn't feel organically like the act of gossip. I said this before in other contexts, mostly about remote work. In many ways, it turned many companies into group chats that many companies today, especially those that are remote, are best described as group chats with a P&L statement. That's what a lot of these companies essentially are. And that is what I think the experience of being at these companies are. I myself, I'll admit, I have a very complicated relationship with Slack because my experience of Slack when I'm using it for work feels a lot like gossip. And sometimes we're just gossiping about the media industry. And sometimes we're gossiping about something that I might write about. But sometimes it's just fun bullshitting, which is a part of what being in an office is

and probably should be. There's a certain amount of familiarity that you need to build with your co-workers in order to trust them, to build psychological safety, to be able to come up with big plans with them. But I do think that there's just something very interesting about the fact that, yeah, I suppose to borrow the technological determinism idea that we invented these tools to make necessary communication more frictionless and it unleashed an enormous amount of unnecessary communication that now feels like a kind of deluge, which inhibits our ability to do the most important kind of work. This is, I think, a good time to bring in this concept of deep work that you've written about. What is deep work as you define it and how does it click into this conversation about the shallows as we discuss them? Well, I mean, think about deep work as a, in some sense, a cognitive state in which you can be doing whatever work it is you're trying to do. It's a cognitive state where you're focused. So you're focusing on something, typically something skill-based, so you're applying hard one skill and you're doing it without distraction, which now we kind of have the terminology from our conversation so far. I mean, we're doing it without context shift. So I'm locked in on this thing. I'm doing this thing. I'm thinking very hard about it and I'm not checking email and I'm not checking Slack and I'm not jumping over my phone. I'm just giving it full attention. And the foundational observation behind deep work is that that cognitive state where I'm locked on one thing and haven't shifted my attention in a while is actually the optimal state for our brain to do stuff that is at all valuable. So that state is a useful state for whatever the main value-producing thing you do as a knowledge worker. I named it so we could see what it was that we were losing and what it was that we should try to preserve. So if you're in a hyperactive hive mind workflow, if you're checking your inbox once every six minutes for all the various reasons we talked about, deep work is impossible. Even if you think you're locked in on this article, if you also keep jumping over to Slack, you're not in a state of deep work because you have that context shifting confusion going on and so your cognitive capacity is reduced. And so this book I wrote about that was basically arguing this is the state that you want to help put people in on a regular basis if they're producing anything at all valuable using their brains. You should be preserving this state in the way that your organization runs. If you work for yourself, you should be preserving the state in the way you work. You should know these are the hours I do it. Here's how I do it. Here's how I protect it. Here's how I train for it. It is the core state for producing valuable work with our minds, but we really didn't have vocabulary for it and it wasn't something that we emphasized or thought about when we thought about work. We instead used all these technological metaphors at whatever access to information, efficiency with which we can move information, digitally produced insights. I want to get the best insights out of data. I want to manage data. I want to move information quickly. I want access to information. I want communication to bounce back and forth. We used all these technology metaphors without realizing the thing that the human brain actually needs to do good work is lack of distraction locked in on one thing for a notable amount of time. Have you heard from people that you've discussed these ideas with that might be CEOs or managers where they'll say, look, of course, deep work is important. And of course, the digital tools we've talked about, email, slack, et cetera, can be a distraction. But my job as a manager is essentially to talk to people. I need these tools. These are not a waste for me. They're

absolutely essential for me to manage my team, figure out where they are in certain products, their psychological states, figure out how they're feeling about certain products. I don't see a way to extricate myself from these tools that you're saying are destroying my ability to have deep focus. How do you reconcile that tension with the managers that you speak to?
I think it's like talking to someone who eats McDonald's for most meals,
and they're very unhealthy. They say, Derek, look, I need fat, carbohydrates, and protein as a human being to survive. If I don't have these in a reasonable ratio, like my hair is going to fall out, I'm going to get scurvy. It would be really bad. And the answer would be, yes, we know you need those things, but there's probably a more careful way, a little more intentional way of consuming food that is going to get you what you need because, of course, you need that without you becoming sick, without you going to a state of ill health. And I think that's what's going on here is, yeah, of course, you need to be able to communicate. I have to communicate with people I work with. I need the ability to send them information and get information back. Of course, that's true. But what's the right way to do that? Is there a way to do that in which we don't have to switch our attention once every five or six minutes? And once you see it that way, you say, oh, yeah, of course, there probably is. We have to figure out some more rules and processes. It's going to be a bit of a pain, just like it's going to be a bit of a pain not to just go by the drive-through window and actually think through, like, what should I eat? And where do I get that food? And am I going to have to exercise more? I think that it is quite analogous. I would also say there's an interesting study I found at some point, I think this is in the email book, where they actually looked at managers. They looked at managers and email usage. And they found the more
email that a manager was using the less time they spent on what the study authors called leadership activities. So less time they spent actually doing the big think that is important to be a manager thinking through, like, what are we missing? What am I, what is my team not getting
from me? Does this person have a clear vision? I need to help this person get a clear vision that's going to help maybe maximize their usefulness and happiness here. I need to think through what's going wrong. What do they need? What direction do we need to change this team? All that goes away,
the more you check email. And the managers that they study that are checking email the most just fell down into what they call productivity activities, which is just the most minor of checking in and moving things back and forth. Did you get this? What about this? When's this client dinner happening? You fall back to the small when you have all the context shifting because your brain can't support the deep. So it's not just that, of course, you have to communicate. But communicating all the time, checking in all the time, sending information all the time is not an optimal state for management. So I'll say, Derek, let me just throw this in here. When I first started talking about this, whatever it be now, seven years, seven years ago, there's a lot more skepticism, right? The type of complaints you're talking about that people were really deep in the hyperactive hive mind. So if you just told me to stop using email, what's going to happen? My whole life would fall apart. By around 2019, 2020, a lot of that skepticism is starting to dissipate. I think things have gotten so bad. The context shifting has become so obviously maladapted that I'm much more likely to hear from, let's say, C-sweeter managers now,

please help. I mean, I don't know what could be done here, but something has to be done. We weren't there yet in 2015. I think by like 2020, we got to a place, and the pandemic probably accelerated this for a lot of people, where we realized this is not working. This is crazy. I just did eight hours of Zoom in a row. This is clearly absurd. And I don't know what the solution is, but there has to be a solution out there. So that's the mind space I think we're in in knowledge work now is a general recognition something is broken here, even if it's not always obvious what to do about it. One comment to agree with what you said, and then one comment to press on what you said, I think there was a Microsoft study in 2021 that showed how much work had been shifted into the 9pm to 11pm hour, because Microsoft workers had to spend so much time during the typical nine to five being in meetings, they couldn't actually get any work done. They were just talking to people and being talked to. And so they had to put their kids to bed, have dinner, water the garden, walk the dog, come back to their office. And then at 9pm, they could so-called get their real work done. That's how much meeting inflation took over, possibly is still taking over in many different companies. One distinction, I think, that's worth pointing out between eating at McDonald's and being stuck in a corporate regime where you wake up every morning and there's five fires and 10 urgent emails. The eater is driving the car and the middle manager is not driving the proverbial car. The middle manager is in a car being driven by the boss. They are in a system or company where there is a pre-existing culture of here's when you email, here's how much you can email, here's how and when you should slack, here are all the group chats where you should discuss these issues and these individual slacks where you should discuss these other issues. So when you have these discussions with companies, how much of the conversation do you think of as this is for the individual worker, this is for the individual middle manager and how much the conversation is just, I'm going to take this straight to the CEO because fundamentally nothing can change unless the culture starts to change at the top.

Well, I think that that is absolutely true. These are systemic problems in the sense that to replace an organization of any size, any reasonable size, to replace the hyperactive hive mind with alternatives is a top-down type thing that has to happen. I often talk about our current state of working like a suboptimal Nash equilibrium. No single worker can leave it by themselves very easily to improve their situation. If everybody else is sort of a tragedy of the digital comments, if everybody else is using the hyperactive hive mind and you say, I'm going to get more deep work in by not checking my email until three o'clock, you actually end up in a worse off situation. You can't unilaterally leave that collaboration strategy because people are counting on you to respond to their messages because again, they have to get seven back and forth messages to reach a decision before the client, before the close of day and you're just going to be screwing a lot of people, that's just going to turn negatively on you and you're going to be in a worse off situation. The only way to get out of this suboptimal Nash equilibrium is that you have to have some force with sufficient authority to push the whole configuration into a different state. That's a top-down thing. In any sort of large organization, it has to be, okay, we're not, we have these alternative processes in place. This is how we actually organize, is how we actually coordinate. I've been preaching this now for a little while. It's a hard message. Let's just look at book sales, for example. Deep Work talked about, hey, focus is important.

Let's not forget that. It gave people personalized advice of what could you do as an individual where you could train yourself to focus more. It could be better, more intentional, like we talked about earlier in the show about how you manage your time to try to protect this time. There's things you can do to schedule that's better than not doing anything and that's a very popular book. Then I wrote a world without email as a follow-up where I said, how did we get to this place with the hyperactive hive mind, the whole history of that, and what would we need to do to get away from that? All of the answers in there are pretty much, we're going to have to change the way at the organizational level that we organize work. That book sold orders of magnitude less because that is a really hard message. That's just how is that going to happen? We have enough pressures already on our company. We're already so busy at the C-suite. We can't even envision how these changes are going to happen. I think that's a really good point to put there is there are things you can do as an individual that help once you recognize what you're trying to do more deep work and what you're trying to avoid context switching. You can make your situation about 50% better, but to make it 80% or 90% better, the whole company has to change. That is very difficult because, again, it's not exactly clear what do we do. There's not one tool we can buy. There's not one management system we can put in place. It's a whole cultural shift. I just think it's a really difficult one. That's the sense I get. It is very difficult to change fundamentally the way collaboration happens. Yeah. You've also very cannily injected a useful criticism of the book publishing industry, or if not the industry, then maybe just the tastes of book readers, that it is always more popular to say, here I have the individual fix, then here is the structural analysis that's going to be more complicated to fix, but that complicated fix actually might be more important. I think that is just a general principle of book sales that is an interesting maybe side conversation. You are now working on this idea of slow productivity. What is slow productivity? Well, I'm working on it. I don't have the definitive answer yet, but I can tell you what the threads of thought here that are coming together. I entered this world of thinking about work and how we organize it through those distraction issues that we talked about before. Once I really started covering what was happening in work, and in particular, for The New Yorker, this was my beat for a while, really trying to understand the way knowledge work was unfolding in our modern digital age, this other issue arose, which was, okay, our definitions of productivity. What we mean when we say productivity in the context of knowledge work is ambiguous, it's ill-defined, and it's not really something that's helping us out that much. We have this vague sense of more is better than less. We have this vague sense of, if I'm busy, that's better than if I'm not. I think a lot of this vagueness comes out of the complexity of knowledge work, which unlike being an 18th century weaver, is not just one activity. It's dozens of different activities that you're trying to jump back and forth and coordinate. It is very difficult, unlike, say, in an assembly line making cars, it's very difficult to measure. How productive are you being? How successful is your current suite of actual techniques? Because there's so many different types of activities that don't produce meaningful outputs, a lot of it's administrative or logistical or collaborative, and it's very difficult. We fall back on these definitions of productivity that seem to be based around busyness, that seem to be based around being visibly useful, being visibly trying to take on things, trying to be performatively as a team player.

And this seems to not be working. It leads to this overload. It helps lead to the situation we talked about before, where you might have eight hours of meetings in a row because you have too much on your plate, and everything on your plate requires a meeting to help it go. It's the overhead tax. You get enough things on your plate, and the overhead tax takes up all your schedule, and there's no time left to actually work on the project. You fall farther behind, you have to work at midnight. All these woes seem to come out of this malformed notion of productivity, so I'm working on an alternative. Let's define an alternative definition of productivity that is going to produce good work, is going to be sustainable for the person doing it, profitable for the company, but also make work more meaningful and enjoyable for the individuals. And that's what I'm working on with slow productivity. I'm trying to articulate a version of productivity that actually works with the way the human brain operates, that avoids overload, that avoids the constant distraction, that focuses more on what's produced over time and not what you did in the last few hours. And so that's what I've been up to recently, is trying to come up with some sort of alternative that you could rally behind and say, this is what I mean by productive in my company. This is what I mean by productive in my own life. This is the metric or the approach or philosophy that I'm going to go after. I'm just trying to actually articulate out there some sort of concrete alternative to what we're doing right now. You know, one idea that I had as I'm listening to you is that it seems like in the manufacturing economy, you could say a home run scores four runs, and in a knowledge economy, home runs can score a million runs. And by that I mean being really productive as a weaver or an auto manufacturer, there's a limit to how productive you can be. You can only as a human being with a certain amount of machinery around you, make a certain number of whether it's quilts or cars or electrical equipment. That number is bounded by time, by muscle, and by machinery. But in the knowledge economy, a home run can score a million runs, by which I mean, how productive was the idea that Nike should sign Michael Jordan to a shoe contract? How productive was the idea that you had that deep work was a valuable concept, and it was becoming more valuable at the same time that our digital tools were making it harder to achieve? On the one hand, these are just mind bubbles. This idea could, on a time basis, take literally half a second. It's a shower idea. It's a mid-workout idea. It's a walk idea. You could have this billion dollar idea or a million dollar idea when you're not even working. And it raises, I think, this really profound and spooky question of why do we even think of productivity at all? Why do you even try to measure it at all like we did in the first half of the 20th century when the most valuable ideas, like their conception, actually has nothing in some cases to do with hard work. In many ways, it's something that comes at the end of lots of hard work. It comes from experience. It comes from curiosity, from a certain amount of familiarity with the market for shoes and athletes or, in your case, productivity and work history. But it just made me think that this concept of extreme productivity has changed so much over the last 100 years that it's sort of crazy that we still even attempt to measure it in the same way. Well, and I think we actually do it way less precisely and more worse than then you even realize in the way the question is worded. So even where you say, why are we even attempting to still measure productivity the same way, we don't even know what it means anymore. I mean, in other words, I think we're in a more ambiguous, confusing situation than we really realize. So there's this vague sense in the way we think about knowledge work of,

man, we're so obsessed with productivity, but is that the right thing? But what do we even mean by productivity there? I mean, what is it that we're looking at that says this person is more productive than that person? I think this is way even that fundamental thing, which was so clear when we were weaving, because I could say, how many feet of cloth did you produce or something like

this? It is completely unclear in knowledge work. We really do not have a foothold to think about. So I think what we criticize when we talk about, even like what you're saying right now, productivity right now, what do we even mean by the word? We mean more a mindset.
You know, it's more of a mindset of more is better than less, busy is less than lazy,
team player is better than, you know, being someone who's difficult,
because, and I think there's a fundamental insecurity driving this, because I can't actually look at the pile of widgets, all of the other optics now matter more. It's almost like my role as a knowledge worker who works in a larger organization is to disprove the hypothesis that I'm somehow pulling a fast one on you, that you're paying me this paycheck, and I'm not really doing much, because honestly, knowledge work kind of looks like that. How do I know? You just sort of sit here at this desk. I don't know what you're doing. And so productivity now becomes almost a game of trying to disprove the null hypothesis of, yeah, I'm just taking a paycheck. You know, I am just sitting at this computer. I am not doing anything. And that's so different than what productivity has meant in any other context where it was always quantitative. We always had some sort of input, we had some sort of output, and we had some sort of well-defined system or process that intermediated between the two. And you could have a very clear comparison. This method produced

this ratio versus that method. This method is better than that method. That's what it was for crops. That's what it was for the introduction of the water frame and the spinning genies, what it was for the powered lumen, what it was, it was for the introduction of the interchangeable parts in the assembly line. That's always what productivity was. And what we're talking about now, when we get to the world of knowledge work, is this weird philosophical mindset, performative, optical. It's a completely different thing. It's an intersocial compact. It's a response to insecurity. It's way more ambiguous and haphazard than I think we realize. And yet we use the word confidently. So
I get a lot of, for example, anti-productivity pushback. So a lot of people pushing back,
but it's unclear. I read a lot of these letters and a lot of things are written about me. It's unclear even what they, what it is they're pushing back against. There's such vagueness around it. And maybe I'm wandering a little bit in this direction, but to me, this is something that's
been fascinating to me recently. Because we don't even really know how to coherently talk about productivity for this type of work. And yet it can seem like we all know what we mean, but it's dewy. Right. I was having a conversation once with my editor at The Atlantic and she
she said something to the extent of, you know, roughly once every year, Derek, you
write an article that introduces some concept or word that enters some kind of online lexicon.
So I wrote, and I say a few years ago about an idea called workism, which is work being the modern religion. And then workism became kind of a thing. And then two years ago, I wrote an article about hygiene theater, this idea that we were doing lots of things to protect ourselves against the pandemic that in effect, scientifically, we're doing nothing to protect us from the

pandemic. And we're giving us a false sense of security. And then hygiene theater and pandemic theater became a bit of a thing. And I wrote a piece about the abundance agenda. And now I'm writing a book about that. If you asked me, like truth serum in my arm, how do you do that? I have no fucking idea. I sit at a desk in front of a computer and I type and I read Twitter and I type and I read until I come up with a couple essays that do poorly, a couple essays that do fine and one or two essays that do spectacularly. I have no idea how to distinguish on the front end which of those essays are going to be okay, very good and sort of lexicon worthy. And maybe this is just unknowable. Maybe it's like asking a songwriter with a handful of hits. How do you write more hits? Well, if I knew the answer to that, I'd be John Lennon and not someone who writes just one hit every three years. But maybe on the more optimistic side, I should be way more purposeful in a perhaps slow productivity kind of way to think about how do I recognizing that these sort of lexicon pieces are I think the most important work that I do. How can I reorient my work around writing less and obsessing over high quality to raise the batting average of those type of pieces? And maybe there is a kind of, if not formula, then at least optimal strategy for maximizing the chance that those kind of pieces flow out of my fingers rather than something that the entire world including me forgets in 24 hours.

Well, but the thing is for a writer like you, a writer like me, we're already way closer to a slower productivity rhythm than most knowledge workers, right? I mean, so if you're a writer and you're saying, okay, I'm going to produce, I don't know, an article a week for the Atlantic or something like this, and they're largely going to leave me alone, come up with articles, some will be better than others. We don't really care how you do it. We don't really care if Tuesday at three o'clock, you're quick to respond to an email address. Ultimately, we're going to look back at this year and say, in the 50 articles that Derek wrote, were there four or five that really had an impact and was there one that entered a new term into the lexicon? That would be a slow productivity approach. It's looking at the highest quality things you produce over a longer term and let that be the goal, not shorter term performative goals of is Derek very quick on Slack? Is he volunteering for all the internal task forces? Is he always answering or sending emails? So in some sense, you probably already are pretty close to slow productivity. So many of the people aren't though, because in a lot of other work circumstances, there's not necessarily that clarity. So you have a clear work product. I have a clear work product. Here's my New Yorker piece. Here's your Atlantic piece. That needs to be really good. It's not a hard argument to leave me alone until I'm done with it. But I think in a lot of other jobs, it gets a little bit more hazy. What is the ultimate thing producing? And so then they can fall back more on, okay, I don't really know what you're doing. So at the very least, I want you to respond to this email, because again, I'm trying to disprove the null hypothesis that you're doing nothing, the fundamental insecurity. But you can completely disprove it, because of course I'm not. Here's my articles. This is my contract. I'm writing these articles. They're doing well for the magazine. You've easily disproved the null hypothesis. But for other jobs where it's much more logistical and coordinated and managerial, it becomes a little bit more difficult. And so some more clarity is needed to say, what are we looking at? What do we mean by productive? In some sense, trying to move more jobs to be closer to what we do. We're going to look at what you did over the course of a year

and want to see that there's good stuff in there. And that's kind of what we care about, not so much where you are on Wednesday afternoon.

I want to make sure that we end here with some of the suggestions that have cropped up in your books, Deep Work, Digital Minimism, a world without email. For those who, when they open their computer, when they look at their phone during the workday, immediately feel what you described at the very beginning of this podcast, that rush of being scheduled by other people's words, other people's emails, other people's slacks, other people's Twitter, immediately schedules their day for them. What are your biggest pieces of advice for people to escape that centrifuge of essentially being trapped by their attention? All right. So going back to our separation before of personal life, social media distraction, work distraction, we can quickly address the TikTok, address the Twitter. These things are engineered to grab your attention. You need to use it a lot less. You probably need to quit more of those services than you're using right now.

The services you do use, you probably need to use on a desktop or a laptop and not on your phone. You need to use it on your terms. You should probably just be doing a lot less of any of those tools. That's digital minimalism. It's a pretty simple thing. You don't need to be using all those tools. You're the one being played here. You're the product that's being sold to the advertisers. Use them less. That's easy in some sense. It's difficult from a willpower point of view, but it's easy logistically. When it comes to what's happening at work, a couple of things I'm going to say just to summarize. One is I think it's helpful to think about just the name context shifts as a productivity poison. So switching your attention from one thing to the other. You have to adopt this mindset of it's like you just took a shot of whiskey during the work day. In the moment, it might feel good, but it's going to start to slow down my brain. My words are going to slur a little bit. I'm not going to get tired. I'm not going to be able to produce as well. You have to think about it the same way. Once you have that one idea, switching context is an expensive thing. I need to do sparingly. Once you have that one idea, it will push you then to introduce alternative ways of collaborating with people. It will push you towards, all right, I'm going to give more instructions in my email about this. We're not just going to go back and forth. It'll push you towards ideas like office hours. If it's one hour every afternoon that I'm always available, I can start deferring back and forth conversations to office hours. Hey, this is important. Call me or get me on Slack or swing by my office during three to four and we'll figure it out. So you can now start taking things that would have all unfolded haphazardly in your inboxes or on Slack and do them all in real time, one hour to a date. Those types of ideas suddenly become obvious when you see context switching as productivity poison. Docket clearing meetings become real obvious. Oh, if our team, I work in a team, we work on things together. There's four of us. We realize we should have these two regular meetings every week. In between, we should have a shared document where people add stuff that need to be discussed, decisions that need to be made, issues that need to be raised. You have put them in a shared doc. When you get to the docket clearing meetings, you start going through those one by one in real time. This is one meeting, not a separate meeting for every issue that will soon take over your whole calendar. This is one meeting where everything gets consolidated. This makes complete sense. Again, processes around information handling that reduce context shifting, that becomes obvious. Why don't we just figure out a way to produce this weekly newsletter?

That does not depend on us just sending emails back and forth. You put a draft in this dropbox by this time. I will take it. I will put my revisions and upload it to the dropbox by the end of business the next day. We then have a 30-minute conversation scheduled every Thursday morning for final points. The designer picks up whatever is in that directory at 5 o'clock on Thursday, and then they go ahead and whatever. You start working out processes where you are putting coordination into the rules and not in the communication. All that makes sense. When you think of context shifting as productivity poison that you're actually trying to eliminate, then the final thing I would suggest is what we open with is be proactive instead of reactive about your time. What do I want to do today? I can't do everything. Here's the time I have. Here's the one big point. Here's some smaller points. What should I do? I have 30 minutes early on. Why don't I consolidate four or five little things I need to get done right there? This two-hour thing is happening midday. That's the key to my day. That's what I'm going to write the article. No distractions. I'm going to lock down headphones on. Okay, then I have these two other 30-minute blocks. Why don't I do a bunch of errands in that one? You begin to take control of your time, figure out a reasonable schedule. What's a good way to make the most of this time you stay as opposed to just being reactive. That coupled with a fear of context shifting, those two things going together makes a big difference. It really will make a big difference. You will feel, again, I'm using this term so vaguely productive. I don't even really know what that means in knowledge work. You're going to be less exhausted. You're going to stay on top of things that are urgent. The quality of the stuff that really matters that you produce is going to go up. Those are the two things I would suggest. I like the idea by way of closing that it's okay to not really know what productivity is. It's okay to maybe even replace the concept of productivity, which is what did I get done within a certain time period with a feeling? How do I feel about the day? Did I feel like I got some stuff done? That feeling of accomplishment, it might be even more important and even have more truth in it, even have more utility in it than any measure of productivity that's just how long was your butt in a seat? How many emails did you answer? That feeling that I moved something forward. Do I feel good about my time? The point about context shifting is so it clicks into that idea so clearly for me because the days that I feel worse are absolutely the days where I feel like I am toggling between five different screens, doing nothing, just waiting for the mood to strike me to do the actual deep work. Those are always the days that I feel worst about, even when I've answered more email that day, sent more slacks that day. There could be a funny situation. I wonder if this is a future study that someone could do of matching a boss's definition of productivity. How much time are you sitting down? How many emails did you send with an individual sense of accomplishment? How good do you feel about whether today met your expectations and you move forward on some kind of project? I do feel like that the gap between old-fashioned definitions of productivity and new-fangled senses of personal vocational accomplishment might be opening up. Last thoughts, Cal.
Yeah, I think that's right. I think in some sense there is, are the main things I do? Am I producing things at the large scale that are quality and good and use my skills and are important and useful? That's what you want to do and feel organized about everything else. I'm not dropping the ball. I'm not trying to keep track of things in my head. I forgot to get this thing to this person

that he needs. You want to be organized, so you reduce that stress of just being all over the place. Outside of being organized, it's in my producing things in the long term that I'm proud of. I think year is probably the right time scale for that. What did I produce last year that I'm proud of? I think that is a useful thing to think about each day as you're going through your days. What am I doing today that when I look back in a year, it's going to contribute towards something I'm proud of because you're not going to reference your email count. You're not going to reference the gifts you found for Slack. None of that's going to come up when you look back and say, what did I do each year that I'm proud of? Maybe that's the whole game. On the scale of years, you want to produce stuff you're proud of. On the scale of days, you want to be sufficiently organized that you're not stressed out and running around and getting in your own way. Some of that

is techniques. Some of that is workload management. A lot of that is coming from the top down, probably, to make that work. But if you feel reasonably on top of the stuff that people need from you and happy about the best stuff that you're working on this year, that should be the model that we're going for, but it's going to take a lot of work to make that standard. Count the report. Thank you very, very much.

Thanks, Dirk.

Plain English was hosted and reported by me, Derek Thompson, and produced by Devon Manzi. We'll see you back here every Tuesday for a brand new episode. Have a great week.

you