



Transcript for the WLEI Podcast:

Imagining A World Without Email With Cal Newport

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*How much of your precious work time is chipped away by myriad distractions—of which the most pernicious might be e-mail and its constant demand for your valuable attention? Author Cal Newport joined WLEI host Tom Ehrenfeld to discuss his newest book, *A World Without Email*, in which he challenges us all to rethink why we need to be constantly plugged into communication that seldom helps us produce valuable work.*

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Welcome to the LEI Podcast. I'm your host Tom Ehrenfeld, and today, we have Cal Newport, author of many successful books, the most recent of which is *A World Without Email: Reimagining Work in an Age of Communication Overload*. Thank you Cal for being here.

Cal Newport:

Well, Tom, thanks for having me on. I always like the opportunity to geek out on philosophies for work optimization and improvement.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Fantastic. That's scary and exciting. Your new book is a mindful assessment of in a positive way, finding ways to do purposeful work with a mindfulness that is prevented increasingly by the new ways of work that people are adopting. The title, *A World Without Email*, uses email as a straw man, if you like, that embodies all the symptoms of a broader problem, which you call hyperactive hive mind. It's a way of working in kind of together that dissipates valuable attention capital, and it wastes mental energy on minutia. Is that a fair assessment of the biggest problem that led you to write the book? What problem are you tackling with your argument?

Cal Newport:

Yeah, no, you're right. The accurate title for this book would actually be *A World Without the Hyperactive Hive Mind Workflow*. Now, my editor, Niki, who you know, was probably not going to be on board with a title that was, not only that long, but would be a title that would probably require a footnote on the cover, even to just explain what it was talking about. But the hyperactive hive mind is the villain of the book. Email enabled the hyperactive hive mind. The hyperactive hive mind is not a necessary consequence of email. Email is a sufficient precondition for the hyperactive hive mind to emerge.

So, they are deeply linked, but they're not synonymous. As you summarize, the hyperactive hive mind is my term for a very specific way to collaborate that says, let's mainly figure things out with unscheduled back and forth ad hoc digital messages. That is the problem. That way of collaboration is incompatible

with the human brain. It is holding back our economy and making hundreds of millions of people worldwide miserable.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

What you do is distinguish between two types of work, there's work that is kind of value adding where you're producing something that delivers to the customer, and then there's all the types of work that are captured in most email uses, which are just trivial political self-serving, and which kind of corrode the necessary focus that one needs to do the deep work, as it were, that produces value. What I think the book offers in a really useful way is a bunch of very clear prescriptions for how to better suss this situation out.

You do say people who use electric forms of communication, so I mean, you do still talk about Slack, Dropbox, Asana, Trello, a whole raft of other E forms as a means of better coordinating the work of teams towards things. What would you say are the key benefits, the key ways that people should ... What they should take from the book when it comes to thinking about how to not squander, but capitalize on attention capital.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. Well, so the productivity poison that we've all been ingesting without realizing that we're doing it is context shifts, right? When you shift your attention from one thing to another, that's an expensive operation. It can take five, 10, 15 minutes for your brain to fully shut down the first context and switch to the second. If you're trying to check an inbox or Slack or Teams, or whatever it is, once every five or six minutes, what happens is, is you're continually triggering these context shifts. Before they can complete, you turn your attention back to the first thing, so you're starting to shift the context, you're stopping that shift, you try and to go back to an original context. Before it can settle in, you go back and initiate a new context. This is a disaster for our cognitive function. It reduces our ability to think clearly. It makes us fatigued. It's why we feel so tired by one or two o'clock in the afternoon and we just give up on work, and it makes us stressed and anxious. The reason why I'm really down on the hyperactive hive mind, this way where we just rock and roll with messages back and forth to figure things out, the reason why I'm down on it, it's not that it's intrinsically bad. In fact, it's a very natural way of coordinating. It's how humans naturally coordinate in smaller groups historically, let's just figure things out on the fly. The reason why it's a problem is that, in the standard office, there is many different people you're coordinating with and many different things you're talking about.

Now you have dozens of these asynchronous back and forth conversations going on. You have to keep checking those inboxes. You have to keep checking the select house. Not because you have a flaw as a person, not because you're addicted to email or have bad norms, but because of this is where your work is actually being organized with all these back and forth conversations. If you leave it alone for three hours, 10 of them are going to get stalled and it's going to be a problem.

If we connect all these chains together, here's how they link up. The hyperactive hive mind causes you to necessarily have to check communication channels all the time. Checking communication channels all the time is a cognitive disaster. So, when you're thinking about, how do I make my knowledge work environment function better? The whole game is figuring out how do we minimize those context shifts? The way to do that is to figure out ways to collaborate that don't require or rely on just unscheduled messages that arrive that people have to then just respond to.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Okay. A more of a kind of structured and mindful approach to allocating the information that needs to be shared.

Cal Newport:

And structuring how that information is stored and shared. Communication actually occurs in such a way that is not dependent on this interruptive ad hoc communication mode that defines the hive mind. The issue with the hive mind, it's not that it uses digital communication tools, it's that this email could arrive at any time, and when it does, you're going to have to get back to it pretty quickly to keep the wheels of this particular thing rolling. Well, that means you're going to have to check again and again and again, waiting for this email to come in so you can catch it and send it back. So, it's the unscheduled interruptive nature of the hive mind that forces constant checking.

I want to make that distinction clear because I think one of the issues with the way that we've discussed in our culture, email overload, is that we come at it from a personal perspective. We say, you're checking your inbox too much because you have a flaw on how you work, as if what's going on in this inbox, it's not really related to your work, and as your own personal failing that, why are you spending so much time in your inbox? Or you blame it on other people, well, people are sending bad messages. People are wasting my time with their messages. They don't know how to write good messages. What this all overlooks is that, a constant stream of messages you have to keep checking for is a necessary property of the hyperactive hive mind. If that is the only thing you have in place for how collaboration is going to happen, no matter how much you tighten up people's email etiquette, habits and norms, you're going to have to check those inboxes all the time. It's actually a feature of how this workflow works. It's intrinsic to it. I think recognizing that is critical if we're going to get past it or actually make progress.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

One of the things you do in the book is you provide examples of organizations that have rethought the way they communicate and deliver stuff, and they're really radically different. The book totally overlaps in some ways with some unspoken practices of lean, which is derived from the Toyota production system. Just to segue, you talk a lot about Henry Ford, but you don't mention Toyota, which I think built on a lot of those innovations in very interesting ways. I think there's ways to see a natural link from what Ford created to what Toyota developed, to the practices of say Agile, Scrum and XP, which all kind of pay homage to lean. A key part of lean or TPS is to focus on value. You start with value.

One way they did it was to start with value and always ask whether everything that they were doing in their work was tied to the production of a vehicle, shorten the time from the moment of start to it's being passed off to the customer. One really useful way to do that was to think in terms of waste, to ID work as a value value-adding, kind of non-value adding, which is waste, and something in the middle, which would be activities that are still necessary, but don't directly add value.

I think that, for me, it raises this question in the book of contextualizing the changes that you're suggesting and asking how much of an emphasis there is on presenting the changes as being pulled by the customer, as like, how much you kind of acknowledge or assign this work in the context of being pulled in terms of delivering specific value.

Cal Newport:

Well, I think there's a few relevant points here. I mean, first of all, just looking back at the historical trajectory, the reason why you'll see me jumping from Ford up to Agile is, Ford is my primary industrial example because Fordism kicked off the idea of radical process re-engineering. It kicked off this idea that wait a second, we can really think about radical new approaches to how we build things. It doesn't have to just be common sense or what's convenient, huge insight that led to all of the industrial growth really in the 20th century.

Out of that, came lean, and those methods were incredibly effective. Obviously, lots of other process, re-engineering innovations, and other sectors also came out of that. It was a huge innovation. When we

get to things like Kanban is where we see the translation sort of the first real consistent translations of some of those ideas into more of a knowledge space sphere. I think Kanban, in particular, I think pulls quite a bit from lean. I mean, I did look at Kaizen and lean in particular, and as you're trying to figure out how to adapt those ideas to knowledge work, you say, oh, that's what Kanban did. It's like, oh, they already did that. I see.

When it was trying to take this into product management away from actual physical production lines, but I think there's two key points to take from that methodology. I think the customer pull is a key one, in particular focusing on value creation, we've lost the thread of that, to some degree, in knowledge work. I think it's clear when you're actually, let's say producing something in an industrial sector, I mean, how many are we selling? What's the price point? Knowledge work we've lost often are what exactly these metrics are. We can't measure how many model Ts are coming off the proverbial line per minute or hour, or what-have-you.

Without that back pressure, it really slows down, I think, process innovation. So, we don't have an easy way of noticing, hey, we're on Slack all day and we're producing 10 times less model Ts. It's not so clear in knowledge work. So, it's really good you point that out, the lack of the clear metrics. The other thing that lean does, which knowledge work and the types of things I talk about, knowledge work doesn't, but I think they should, is it's, of course, very internal, very process-focused, but it also sees processes as being imminently mutable.

Let's tweak, change, tweak, what can we do? We don't do any of that in knowledge work. A lot of knowledge or context, it's like, look, let's just rock and roll. Like, you all have an email address. We're all on Slack. We'll buy software that makes certain operations faster, but beyond that, we just go for it. That attitude of like, let's just go for it, we'll figure it out, it's really the antithesis of what you would see in a process re-engineering methodology like lean.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Yeah. One thing I loved about your book is that there were a couple, like in the middle of it, processes you described where you almost, as an aside, talked about tweaks that you made. I think one of them had to do with the process you introduce helping your TAs' grade papers. I forget what adjustment you made, but you learned through doing it that it would benefit from this adjustment. Okay. That actually raises another thing that really had me curious reading the book, which is, you've cited Peter Drucker, who I love.

You say that, in recognizing the value of the knowledge worker as the kind of new cog in the economy, he pushes for mechanisms of increasing autonomy. It struck me as that's necessary, but not sufficient. That autonomy alone I don't think that produces great work. I think it's almost a sense of agency, that I was wondering if there were ways that the kind of, again, methods you've described, provide not just autonomy to workers, but have built in mechanisms that empower them to design the processes they're working on and really give them authority to improve their own work and to improve both the work itself and the kind of structures of the work.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. It's a really interesting tension, and Drucker, and I hadn't really heard this reported on before. I feel like it's one of the scoops from the book is understanding the dichotomous impact of Drucker's insistence on autonomy. I mean, he did really important work in the '50s and 60s, coining the term knowledge work, and explaining to American managers, this is what knowledge work is. It's different than industrial work. He introduced the management by objectives and argued, and I cite throughout the second half of 20th century example, after example at Drucker saying autonomy, autonomy, autonomy, and you're right, and he was right, that the execution of knowledge work is often creative and skilled.

It's not ever going to be reduced to an assembly line. Writing ad copy in the 1960s. He's looking at Madison Avenue. You weren't going to have an assembly line of, we crank these 10 steps in a row and you get Don Draper. He was right to point out, this is different than what we're seeing in the factories. You got to leave a knowledge worker alone, and that does give them a good sense of agency in how they execute as well.

The issue I think is that, that autonomy was also applied to how the work was organized, and it was that overreach is what we got into trouble. We said, okay, we'll also leave it, implicitly, we'll leave it up to the worker to figure out how to organize their work. How you keep track of things, how you talk to people, what you decide to work on when, how much stuff is on your plate versus someone else. Like, good, hey, don't touch the workers, it's up to them. Just give them clear objectives, mantra by objectives. Here you go.

No process. No thinking about process, no thinking about agreements about we as a team is here's how we keep track of things or how we decide who should be working on what or when we talk about it, nothing that even tweak, because we didn't even write it down. The autonomy, extension autonomy to how we organize work, I think is one of the reasons why the hyperactive hive mind both emerged and persisted, because there is real no culture in knowledge work of saying, what is our process for organizing this type of work? How's it going? Hey, who has suggestions of how we could do that better? It's just the hive mind all the way down.

I think you're right in pointing out that actually having structure on the how work is organized, structure that is above just the level of the individual. As long as that individual, and I get into this in the book in some details, as long as that individual is involved in the crafting and modification and improvement of those structures, that them and their whole team operates on, it's incredibly empowering and it actually makes them able to do their work much better. You have a lot more agency. So, yeah, that's the sweet spot. We have to pull back the autonomy, the individual autonomy off of organization.

But I argue that autonomy should exist at the scale of the team. That if you go up too far, if you say, okay, our COO of our 2,000 person company is going to figure out, here's how we organize our work, you're taking away agency. You're going to wander into bureaucracy territory. It's not nearly agile enough. If you leave it up to the individual, you have the hive mind, but if the team gets together, here's how we do these different types of work, and we change it as needed, I think that's the sweet spot.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Yeah. About two-thirds of the way, and you talk about the value of automated processes, that there's certain schools have of getting things done, to use a loose term, that kind of recognize the value of identifying what in lean would be called standard work, certain tasks that are done repeatedly, and where it benefits from identifying the right sequence of the work done by who, and that is the basis for improvement in lean. So, it is the workers who create and write the standard work, and that enables them to identify problems, so whenever standard work is somehow kept from happening, that's an improvement opportunity, and they do root cause analysis of any gaps to change the standard work for the better.

I think you basically make the point that the people doing the work should be creating and identifying the automated processes.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. Right. I used the word automated maybe a little bit more narrowly, because I think the concept you're saying applies broader than just my use of automated processes, that yes, the individual should be involved with their team in figuring out how this work happens. Now, I have a narrow application of automated, which doesn't cover all of the different types of knowledge work. Where this type of

involvement is important for me, when I'm using the word automated, it's the type of knowledge work where it's always the same sequence of steps.

Cal Newport:

So, it's this and this and this and this. If you know there are always the same sequence of steps, you can usually engineer some sort of process around that that eliminates unscheduled messages, so you can get from this, to this, to this without ever having a step where it requires you to see a message that's arriving at some unscheduled time and responding on it for it to move forward. Automation is the way. Instead it's in this, we keep it in this folder. We change the spreadsheet. There's an automatic notice that goes out. There's a Zapier script that jumps in. There's other types of stuff you do that it's not always the same sequence of steps.

As a team, okay, we have to figure out how to build a new marketing campaign for a product. We've never done it before. We can't break it down, and then here's the 10 steps. It's a one-off thing, but even then, you can be very structured about, where are we going to store the information? When are we going to talk about this information? How are we going to keep track of who's working on what? How much should anyone be working on at any one time? How do we check in on how that's going? You could figure out these ideas as a team about here's how we're going to do all of these things related to this work that is now on our plate.

If it's not working, then we can shift that, but we know what it is. We've written it down. It's clear what our approach is going to be.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Yeah. What's interesting is that, you say one of the information principles that there are times where having more information or more rules has the impact of simplifying the doing of the work. I do think that's like invaluable to understand how getting agreement upfront about the ... What are the rules of engagement? Can facilitate a much greater, a much better flow of work?

Cal Newport:

Yeah, I think it's a very useful analogy. We're thinking about information theory, right? Because if you go pre Claude Shannon, pre mathematical foundations of communication, what is the approach? Trying to get more communication, we're thinking about the Telegraph companies or something. It's literally like, let's just make the pipe bigger. So, thicker cables and jam more voltage at it. Let's just throw more at it. If we want to get more communication, let's have more cables, throw more energy through it. Shannon came along with information in theory, and said, you can design what he called codes, but if you really study the structure of the information and you do a lot of work, you can figure out a very clever way of actually encoding this information, and you and the person on the other end agrees on this.

And it takes a lot of work upfront. It's a pain. I do some information theory. I just published a paper in information theory, it's a pain. But then, our communication is going to be really, really efficient, and it's going to be ... We can make it resilient to noise, and it's going to, on average, use not very much bits. That's what all modern communication is built on. Without that insight, we would still have just telegraphs basically. So, you needed a theory. It's a great analogy, that when it comes to all the different coordination we have to do at work, we tend to just like, our equivalent of throwing more energy onto the telegraph copper is, let's just make the communication tools faster, or even less friction. We'll go from email to Slack, and it can just jump immediately and you can have it on all the time.

We'll put on your phone. That's just the communication equivalent of just, put more voltage on the copper, where what we really need is Shannon style codes, which in this analogy is, well, wait a second, let's figure out how we deal with producing white papers for our such and such clients. We do this again and again. Okay, this is going to be a pain to figure it out upfront. We're going to have to have these folders and a set day when we do it, and we might have to put some software in place. A huge pain

upfront, but now going forward, every time you produce this thing, you're resilient to noise and you're using less bits.

It's going to be much, much less costs on average going forward, and that's when you get the big wins. We have to be willing to be inconvenienced now so that in the long run, we're using much less of this sort of metaphorical voltage on the line.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Right. The inconvenience is experienced in the kind of explicit meta-work of understanding and designing the appropriate amount of kind of rules that govern interaction and organization prioritization of information.

The book does this remarkable job of describing the systems that have provided huge benefits to organizations in producing mindful, purposeful work. I was surprised at how little discussion about the behavioral skills that are needed to make these types of systems work. Does it recast the role of a leader? Again, to fall back on lean, within lean, the most important work is done by team leaders, who work as coaches or like skippers on a boat, who can always jump in and do the work. They're just asking questions, and above all, helping people tackle the problems that are expected to occur. As opposed to a kind of top-down command and control person giving the same orders to everybody.

But I didn't see much exploration of what are the kind of trade-offs when you put these systems in. They're not, what's the metaphor where you just put a system on and turn off the lights? They still, like anything else, I think it's a little unexamined. It's like what or who runs these systems optimally? What type of leaders? What type of people?

Cal Newport:

Yeah, I think this is a big open question, and I lean away from being too prescriptive in the book, because I think the prescriptions, at least on this, it really differs if we're talking about a large corporation, if we're talking about a solopreneur, if we're talking about a small startup, but I can mention a few things I've seen that I think are good ideas. I think in the larger organization, lean does this, scrum does this. I actually, this got cut from the book, but I went back and talked to engineers from the original Ranger and Apollo programs back in the early space program, because I wanted to know. I had this whole thing about, how do we send the man to the moon without email? I talked to a lot of people from that program, and it was originally part of a New Yorker article that got cut. I drew from there as well, and an idea, I didn't write about this as much in the book, but I think the team with a team lead concept applies in a lot of places. Back in the Apollo days, they call these the cognizant engineer, and that was the person who was in charge of the group. We see this in lean inspired knowledge work, project management methodologies. In agile methodologies, you have the scrum master and scrum. I was very interested in a more extreme version of scrum called extreme programming, where they leaned very heavily on a leader. One of the things I love about that model is that in most of these models, the leader, the team leader, the cognizant engineer, the scrum master, whatever you want to call it, they interface on behalf of the team to the rest of the organization. That is a huge win.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

And they're gatekeepers. They handle all communications that come to the team and they choose what they allow to go through. They're the arbiter of value adding work. They let valuable stuff enter this workplace.

Cal Newport:

That I think is a crucial innovation where that's possible. It's so important that CEOs, like C-level C-suite executives that are very high level, where it's just one person, they basically simulate this with the

growing popularity of the chief of staff model. You'll have a chief of staff if you're a CEO of like a big software firm or something like this. The chief of staff is the lead. It plays that lead. All communication comes to me. I'll figure out what needs to go to this person. I think that model should be way more widely deployed.

At the executive level. I think there needs to be something like a chief productivity officer. You need to have someone who sets the culture and the emphasis on, how are we doing our work? Is it sustainable? Is it working? Could it be better? And empowers that culture throughout an organization. That could fall under the role of COO, but a lot of other logistical stuff falls into that role, so I do like that idea of a productivity officer, but I love the team lead concept. This should be way more widely deployed.

One place, for example, I'm always surprised it's not deployed is like academic departments. I think academic departments should have basically an equivalent of a team lead that all of the incoming fire from the rest of the university, it can't just go straight to the professors. It goes into this team lead. You would get 2X more research productivity on your professors, or the cost of one extra salary. If you had someone high level who basically, everything comes through me, I'll process through requests, maybe you have to have a smaller team if it's a big department, but man, I think you'll get a huge ROI, get between the people who are mainly being paid the use mental cycles to construct new value, add new value to information. You got to get in between that and everything else is trying to steal those cycles.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Yeah. I mean, that makes powerful sense to me. I think that it's just this thing I think I was nudging you about, which is the need to blend social and technical. So, any kind of dynamic system can include these like rules of engagement, whatever these almost formal organizational rules with some give for the social mess that enters them.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. Well, and I will say that there are two social aspects I highlighted because I think they're important, that if you're going to make these types of shifts, the two things you need is motivational psychology. So, the more someone feels like they're involved with the construction of a process, the better. It's really hard for these type of processes to impose them from above. You will get resistance. They will fall apart. It's why I recommend even in the book that if you're just making changes on your own, which can make a big difference. You process re-engineering your own processes to reduce unscheduled messages, which I think people should do.

I argue, for example, don't advertise that, because if you advertise to someone else, here's the changes I made that is going to allow me to be more effective. The way that is processed from a motivational psychology standpoint is you have made changes without my buy-in. This is going to make my life more difficult. I don't like that. That's why the trend of having autoresponders that explained when you were going to check your email, why that went away is, because every time you saw that autoresponder, there's a part of your social brain that says, I never agreed for that. You're making my life harder with this. Okay, I'm just instinctually going to be resistant.

The other psychological hack I think is important is, even when you're working together to build these systems, there's a huge amount of loss aversion, and so people will be very nervous about a particular process because you know what? That might have a hard edge. For just rock and rolling, we can figure out everything. This, I don't know, we don't meet till Wednesday. What if the client calls on Tuesday? It could be a problem. Is a psychological hack there is to have what we call an escape valve. So, there's a fallback, relatively high friction. Like, it's high enough friction compared to an email that is not going to just lead to everyone just go back to emails.

Maybe it's a phone call or something like this. You have a fallback that can handle any unplanned circumstance that the new process doesn't do well with. Just having that usually goes a long way towards getting people to accept it, and it's rarely used, but it gives people peace of mind. Those were two psychological hacks, I did. Point two, they're just two examples, so I think of the broader point you're talking about, which is, it is hard to do this. Again, one of the reasons why I'm not super prescriptive, I give examples in principles is because I'm not a management theorist. I'm coming out of academia and not coming out of the business community. So, I wanted to make sure that I was giving principles for people who understand better how organizations run, and to figure out how to do it to actually get too far beyond the principles into and here's how you should restructure your teams. I'd be concerned I'd be getting too far out over my skis at that point. I'm trying to empower the people who actually know a lot more about business. I can do theory, communication theory in particular, cognitive, the human-techno interaction, dynamical systems. This is really my sweet spot, how we're going to take Kaiser Permanente's front office and reorganize it so that there's non-overlapping chains of command or something like that. Okay. Now you probably don't want my advice.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Yeah. I can't be more emphatic. I'm not trying to like cross-examine you and what the book doesn't do. That's not it at all. I'm raising questions that it raised for me. I mean, just one other aspect that, I mean, I think that one of the kind of real elegant mechanisms in TPS or lean is accumulation of methods and tools such as use of standard work and delivering everything based on pull, on what the customer values, that create healthy tensions to constantly improve. The purpose of standard work being to identify the best known way to so-called automate processes and to set up a flag so that when the standard work, the ideal way is not being achieved, you then pair it with this kind of social cultural norm within the organization that you're going to find out why. Problems are welcomed and problems are framed as gaps between what's expected than we know it should happen, then what actually happens. And then they do root cause analysis to understand what kept it from happening, the famous five why exercise to understand. I think that's a place where you get this convergence of the work itself and an assessment of the meta work, where you're kind of marrying these two different aspects. So, is this to track mindset necessary to do better work, to find a way to bridge the analysis of how to do better work into the doing of the work itself? And forgive the meta nature of the question.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. No, I mean, I think it's both fundamental and almost completely missing from many knowledge work contexts. Even the question of, well, how do we do this? Is a foreign question for a lot of knowledge work like, well, how do we normally do this? They're like, what do you mean? I just send you an email about something I need and you answer it, and in the end, this all is supposed to just aggregate up some sort of value production. I think inculcating that mindset is probably the crucial step. Inculcating a more general mindset in the knowledge worker of there's different ways to do things, how are we doing it right now? Could it be better? Is there an issue here? Is it not going well? Now, the autonomy trap is one reason why we don't do this, this sort of Drucker inspired notion of like that's for the individual. Let's not talk about it. The other issue we have, and I get into this briefly towards the end of the book in the principle is that, in knowledge work, in a way that it would be much more difficult, or to do an industrial work would be much more clear, that's an issue. We do too much. We actually, we way overload the cognitive demands, the number of things going on, the number of things that everyone has to be involved. It's way overloaded for actual cognitive capacities. That's a setting in which it's difficult to have

that mindset. So, it's one of the reasons that holds people back from thinking about how we do work is because they have so much damn stuff to do, that there's no time to do it. It's this constant race. I think the way quantity control happens and knowledge work often is let's just fill things up until people are about to break, and then we'll put the break on there. Now, that's already then you're probably 50% too far, but you go into like, all right, this is starting to get unreasonable. I can sort of see the stress in someone's eyes. By the way, it's one of the reasons why the unexpected shift to remote work during the pandemic increased a lot of people's workloads. We lost one, I mean, there's a lot of reasons, but one of the reasons is we lost the ... We were using these informal social feedback loops. You really look overburdened and stressed out. Okay, now I'll kind of pull back putting stuff on your plate. When we're just abstract email addresses on a digital screen, it's much easier, you'd be like, can you do this thoughts? Let me jump this on your plate, jump on the Zoom when we just become abstraction. That's the other issue we have. In industrial manufacturing, there's other rate limiters. We have this much material, that the machinery can only go this fast. There's much more clear rate limiters, so now you can step back and say, okay, now how do we get more out of it? That's the other thing going on in knowledge work, is that we just overload the hell out of everyone, and then no one has any breathing room to even adopt that mindset, even if they knew that was a possibility.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Yeah. I think that's the hidden message about *A World Without Email* is that we're asking people to do way too many of the things that they shouldn't be doing in the first place, that we're asking them one question, so we're not asking, is this work you really should be doing? Does this add value? Is it something you're good at? Does this move the organization closer to its purpose? That we just fill people's inboxes and other relentlessly mushrooming forms of other electronic communication with distracting minutia.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. Let me just add, the other thing that happened is electronic "productivity enhancing tools," we completely bungled that shift in the market when personal computers came along that could go on the desktop and then could network those computers. We bungled that productivity potential because what did we do? Instead of saying, oh great, now the support staff can be supercharged, now the support staff has all of these tools, the same support staff can maybe support even more frontline workers, etc. Instead of doing that, we said, let's fire the support staff. Great, we don't need a typist because WordStar is just easy enough that this executive can type up their own memos, and we don't have to pay the typist.

Okay. That's true. Except for, you multiply that by four or five other things that now is on that executive's plate, you need to have those executives to get the same amount of work done. Oh, it would have been much cheaper to have one executive with a dedicated support staff. So, we bungled the arrival of productivity enhancing technology by using it to basically move tons of administrative work that used to be more specialized and isolated onto the plate of the people who were also trying to do the frontline value production. It was a big mistake, I think, and it's one of the reasons why so little actually gets done, even when we're paying people huge salaries.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Yeah. I'm going to respect our time. I think I'll try to just wrap it up with a kind of a blue sky question. What's the world of work going to look like if people read your book, take these ideas into consideration and change the way they work accordingly?

Cal Newport:

I think, first of all, tools like email will become much more like physical mail was 25 years ago. Something that, yeah, I check it, maybe once a day. It's not a big deal if I miss it for a day, but it's ... You have to send me a contract, some invoices are coming my way, the stuff that you would normally go and get out of the mail from the mail room or the cubby at your office mail room or something. That's what email is going to be like. It's certainly not going to be the background hum that your whole day is driven by.

Email is going to play that much reduced role. I think we'll also see a lot more specialization. I think we'll see a lot more, I do less, I do those things better, a lot more of a Kanban style WIP work in progress limit, like this one I'm working on today. Now I'm done.

Not this current method of there's 70 things on my plate that I'm chaotically trying to move forward this or that. We're going to look back at that and say, wow, we're using this machinery very, very poorly.

That's what I expect we're going to get to, is a lot less of this back and forth ad hoc communication, email is going to be like a mailbox. People are going to be much more specialized working on less stuff, but producing a lot more total value per day. We're also going to free up a ton of cognitive cycles. We're so ineffective in how we're using brains right now, that when we get more effective, we're going to have a lot more available brain power from the exact same population.

I'm interested, if not a little trepidatious, to see what that's going to unfold. The bad scenario would be that's going to lead to cuts and creative non-automatable jobs, because now less people can get the same amount of work done. The optimistic vision is it's going to lead to all sorts of new outlets for all of these suddenly freed up brain cycles that, okay, yeah, we don't need as many lawyers to handle these cases because they're not so distracted on email, but the brains that would be doing this law work distracted are now doing other types of work where we didn't have as many people before new industries, new innovation.

Hopefully, the latter is what happen, but it will be a different world. It's inevitable because a profit ... It's an incredibly ineffective use of resources, the way we're running this right now. It's inevitable that we're going to move away from the way we work. It doesn't benefit anybody. It's not one of these situations where it's management versus the worker and one person's benefits hurts the other. No one likes this way of working. It's just a poor return on capital and it makes the workers miserable. Of course, we're going to move past it. I'm just curious about how long it's going to take and what that new world is going to look like.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

Fantastic. I'm going to formally stop here. Thank you. Thank you, Cal.

Cal Newport:

Thank you.

Tom Ehrenfeld:

I want to remind people that *A World Without Email* is the new book by Cal Newport.