



# THE DUAL CAREERS OF CAL NEWPORT

Alumnus balances two different worlds: teaching computer science and writing business bestsellers.

By Stephanie Schorow | Connector Contributor

**C**alvin “Cal” Newport, SM ’06 and PhD ’09, doesn’t see the world the same way that many of his peers do in today’s connected, Googling, and multi-tasking workplaces. Where many see productivity, he sees disorganization. Where others see communication, he sees distraction.

Not that Newport, Provost’s Distinguished Associate Professor of Computer Science at Georgetown University, is anti-technology. Nor that the author of several best-selling business

books opposes workplace innovation. Rather, Newport casts a suspicious eye on the very tools — e-mail, smartphones, Slack — that are supposed to make us more efficient.

Here’s how he provocatively puts it in his popular Study Hacks Blog: “As a distributed algorithm theorist ... when I encounter a typical knowledge economy office, with its hive mind buzz of constant unstructured conversation, I don’t see a super-connected, fast-moving and agile organization — I instead see a poorly designed distributed system.”

What gives weight to Newport’s words are his accomplishments before, during, and after his years studying computer science at MIT, and his dual career as a computer scientist and book author. A casual observer might think that he is a 24/7 multi-tasker who rarely takes a break from the computer screen. Instead, Newport professes to live by the idea he espouses in his most recent book, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (Grand Central Publishing/Hachette Book Group, 2016). He keeps — more or less — normal work hours and avoids distractions such as social media and even e-mail. To spend time with his two- and four-year-old boys, he doesn’t work in the morning or evening.

“To get what I need to get done just during normal work hours really does require that I’m very focused,” says Newport, who lives in the Washington, D.C., area. That means that when he works, he works with deep concentration in intense blocks

*At MIT, Newport trained in an environment that required intense concentration; he saw a tangible connection between the ability to concentrate and quality of output.*

of time. “That’s in part why I don’t have any social media,” he says. “I don’t Web-surf. I’m hard to reach. That’s because I only have so much time if I’m going to produce the stuff that I need to produce. I really need to spend that time locked in.”

Newport, a boyish-looking 34-year-old, has been “locked in” since his high school days near Princeton, N.J., where he and a friend launched Princeton Web Solutions, a dot-com era Web development and sourcing company. He went on to attend Dartmouth College; before graduating summa cum laude with a degree in computer science in 2004, he had already written his first book.

“I arrived at college having read lots of business books. You need them when you’re running a business,” Newport recalls. At that point, he wanted to learn more about succeeding in school, dealing with student loans, and similar issues. “Back then, you couldn’t find a real, serious advice book for college students. Everything was written to be fun and approachable,” he recalls. “I wanted a book that said, ‘OK, here’s how you get good grades.’”

Not finding what he sought, he conducted interviews with national and international scholarship winners and used the material to write *How to Win at College: Surprising Secrets for Success from the Country’s Top Students* (Three Rivers Press, 2005). Other books followed, including *How to Become a Straight-A Student* (Three Rivers Press, 2006), which was based on interviews with 50 straight-A students. A few years later, he entered the business book market with *So Good They Can’t Ignore You: Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You*

*Love* (Grand Central Publishing/Hachette Book Group, 2012).

Each book reflected a stage in Newport’s life. “I think I write the book I need, not the book that I think I need to tell people about,” he says. He wrote *So Good* “not because I had some great answers I wanted to share, but because I wanted an excuse to do the research to get an answer for myself.”

He balanced book-writing with his research at MIT. From 2004 to 2009, he was a research assistant and teaching assistant in the Theory of Distributed Systems Group at the Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Lab (CSAIL). From 2009 to 2011, he was a postdoctoral associate in CSAIL’s Networks and Mobile Systems Group. Around that time, he started a blog he continues today. After graduating from MIT, he became an assistant professor of computer science at Georgetown University in 2011; he was named to the distinguished associate professorship in February 2017.

At MIT, Newport trained in an environment that required intense concentration; he saw a tangible connection between the ability to concentrate and quality of output. That led to development of the ideas that would become *Deep Work*, a *Wall Street Journal* business bestseller and an Amazon Best Book of 2016 Pick in Business and Leadership. “Deep work,” according to Newport, is “the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task. It’s a skill that allows you to quickly master complicated information and produce better results in less time.”

Deep work is done without the checks that most people do throughout their day: a quick glance at the inbox; a quick glance at the phone. “We know from the research and experience that these quick checks actually significantly reduce your cognitive capacity,” he said. This is also why Newport wants to tell people they are “allowed” to stop using social media. “I don’t use it. I find it’s too addictive for me,” he says. “It’s going to take me away from the things I really care about.”

If you think you can’t live without clicking on your Twitter feed, Newport offers this insight: “Deep work is a trainable skill. Most people think about intense concentration like a habit, like flossing their teeth, something they know how to do; they really just need to make some more time to do it. The reality is it’s much more like a skill, like playing the guitar.” In other words: If you haven’t been practicing, you won’t be very good at it.

Deep work also has applications for MIT undergraduates, in Newport’s view. “You need to do less, and do what you do better. That’s actually the formula for both success in your academic life and also in terms of your own personal health, satisfaction, and happiness,” he says.

“When I was in college, for example, I didn’t double-major, I didn’t triple-major. I didn’t join 15 clubs. I did computer science and I wrote. And those have consistently been my two things. I try to do those things as well as I can.”

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