

Deep Work

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Welcome to 2023! Did you do a review of 2022, and did you notice that you had (maybe as in previous years) more stress, published less and written fewer grants than you thought you could have or should have done? Fret not – you're not alone.

The problem

“Stress in academia seems to be omnipresent. Only 38% of academics indicated that they could cope with the demands of their jobs¹. This particularly includes enough time to work on research, including writing high-quality articles and grants.

In polls, academics report that roughly 60% of time (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01914-z>) is dedicated to administrative tasks and teaching, which means that many academics work extra hours, often late or on the weekend, to work on papers or grants. In addition, this kind of work requires high levels of attention and being able to focus on one task while shielding oneself from distracting information and other tasks. The daily work of academics, requires deal with multiple tasks at the same time and is characterized by a constant flow of incoming information, however, obstructs this kind of deep work. Paradoxically, doing research is the aspect that academics enjoy most in their work and why they chose their profession. Furthermore, writing grants and papers is required to advance in one's career, especially in young academics, and therefore should receive more attention.

Continuously not being able to find time for writing articles and grants causes frustration, lowers work satisfaction and self-efficacy (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00661-w>). This has a major impact on the well-being of researchers and can be a key reason for leaving academia.”

That was us about half a year ago – continuously putting out fires in our research groups, spending precious time on carefully reading that Master thesis for the committee we were on or helping yet another student find their dream internship, but wondering – where is the time for research? When do I think about my next cool idea that will maybe get me this ERC grant?

So, as a group (we met at the 5th leadership academy of the German Scholars Organization, a total recommendation should anyone have any doubts), we decided to do something about it: to have regular, online focus sessions.

Now, we're clearly not the inventors of the idea: Cal Newport writes in his book "Deep Work - Rules for success in a distracted world" that deep work is "*the ability to focus without distraction on a cognitively demanding task*". It's exactly that style of work required to get ahead in the tasks labeled "important but not urgent" in the Eisenhower matrix – you know, writing that paper,

¹ Sang, K., Powell, A., Finkel, R., & Richards, J. (2015). 'Being an academic is not a 9–5 job': long working hours and the 'ideal worker' in UK academia. *Labour & Industry: a journal of the social and economic relations of work*, 25(3), 235-249.

thinking about your next research topic, doing that tricky calculation – i.e., exactly those tasks that never get priority and are infinitely delayed in the day-to-day business.

The idea of the focus sessions is simple:

1. Schedule a meeting (online, offline, whatever works) of about 2 hours with 1-3 other academics. They can be from different disciplines, it doesn't matter, they're there for accountability and that you don't simply skip the meeting.
2. Start the session with a check-in (roughly 15 minutes), where each of you indicates which important but not urgent task they would like to work on (see table below for some guidelines), and give a deliverable for this session. The other(s) will give feedback, on whether this is a deep-work-worthy task, and also on the deliverable. Be strict here!
3. For the next 90 minutes, work on your own tasks. No distractions! Cal Newport would recommend switching off all notifications and even putting the phone in another room...
4. End the session with a check-out (15 minutes), where all of you report how it went and make notes on how to continue with the task, and, importantly,
5. Make a new appointment for the next meeting :)

Here are some guidelines for how to pick a good task:

Dos	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work on stuff that will bring you further in your career (paper/grant writing, revising paper where one is co-author, targeted reading, thinking about own strategy, data analysis when needed for a paper) - Important but not urgent - Stuff that requires deep focus / is cognitively demanding - Work package that is feasible and predictable in time frame 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work on stuff that is only important to other people but not you (teaching, grading, reviewing, admin, emails) - Urgent tasks (you'll do these anyway) - Shallow work (that email can be written in an unconcentrated time after lunch) - Too short tasks (not 5 smaller things, even if they would require deep work)

After a few successful months of meetings a few times a week, we decided to plan a focus weekend. During our retreat – funded generously by Alumnnode – we scheduled 2 focus sessions each day over the course of 3 days, interspersed with "input sessions" where we shared tips and tricks from other productivity courses we had attended. It not only allowed us to finish big tasks – one of us developed and re-developed an entire idea for an ERC grant, another of us wrote a full grant where the idea had been developed previously – but we also had the opportunity to brainstorm and discuss collaborations within our group – that will be further written up in future deep work sessions.

A few more learnings we gathered throughout the last months:

- Prepare before the focus session what to work on exactly, like which documents are necessary etc (keep a list of deep-work tasks ready)
- Take a brief moment before the focus session to disconnect from thoughts regarding previous meetings/tasks
- Good time: 1.5 hours of effective working time (plus 15min check-in and 15min check-out - 2h in total)
- Be strict with the tasks that the others suggest to really ensure everyone is only working on deep work
- Don't choose tasks that are too small, then you'll be done before the end of the session and will have to switch tasks which is against the idea of deep focus.
- The finite duration of the focus session helps to not loose yourself in finding perfect solutions, even most deep work tasks benefit from an 80/20 approach
- For longer/larger work items, it's helpful to have multiple deep work sessions back to back or to plan a retreat.

For us, there's really no going back to weeks without focus sessions. In the past months, we managed to finish papers, grant applications, make time for literature study and data analysis, and just overall feel more content in our day-to-day work.

Give it a try – find some buddies, amongst your colleagues at your institution or on Alumnnode, and schedule a few meetings, and see how it goes!