

# Deep Work Summary – Cal Newport

8 MINUTE READ

[Deep Work](#) (2016)

Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World

by [Cal Newport](#)

Deep Work is a timely reminder of the value of deep, focussed work and the dangers of losing yourself in the shallows of entertainment and distraction - by author and computer science professor, Cal Newport.

([296 pages](#))

[Paperback](#) | [Ebook](#) | [Audiobook](#)

**Note:** This **Deep Work summary** is part of an ongoing project to summarise the [Best Productivity Books](#) and [Best Self Help Books](#) of all time.

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## Deep Work Review

This excellent book by MIT alumni and Georgetown professor [Cal Newport](#) is a must read for anyone wanting to focus on the things that really matter by cutting down on fire-fighting, meeting attendance, email herding, and

the pernicious effects of internet browsing and social media.

The book begins by categorising work as either deep or shallow where:

- **Deep work** is made up of professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive abilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill and are hard to replicate (similar in concept to [purposeful practice](#)); and
- **Shallow work** is made up of non cognitively demanding, logistical style tasks often performed while distracted. These efforts tend to not create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate.

The first half of Cal's book explains why deep work is so valuable, rare and meaningful in today's fractured, [winner-takes-all](#) world. He convincingly argues that our attention is often so fractured that we actually accomplish very little genuinely deep work in a typical day.

Perhaps more worrying is his claim that months and years of exposure to shallow work and distraction has a long-lasting negative affect on our ability to focus our attention that is not quickly or easily reversed.

The broad and substantial evidence base in this section draws deeply from examples set by influential thinkers and doers throughout history (from [Carl Jung](#) and [Nate Silver](#) to [Bill Gates](#)). Though it doesn't lend itself well to being crunched it is well worth reading if any further motivation for action is needed beyond our own personal experiences of the reward and meaning to be found in the too rare moments of stillness that allow us to "get some real work done".

The second half of Cal's book is full of powerful and actionable suggestions to shift our balance back towards deep work. These practical tips include ways to identify and eliminate existing bad habits, [build new good habits](#), implement structural quick-wins and actively train and improve our attention. I have personally experimented with most of Cal's

suggestions (with some minor modifications from other authors) and cannot recommend the effort to follow through with them strongly enough.

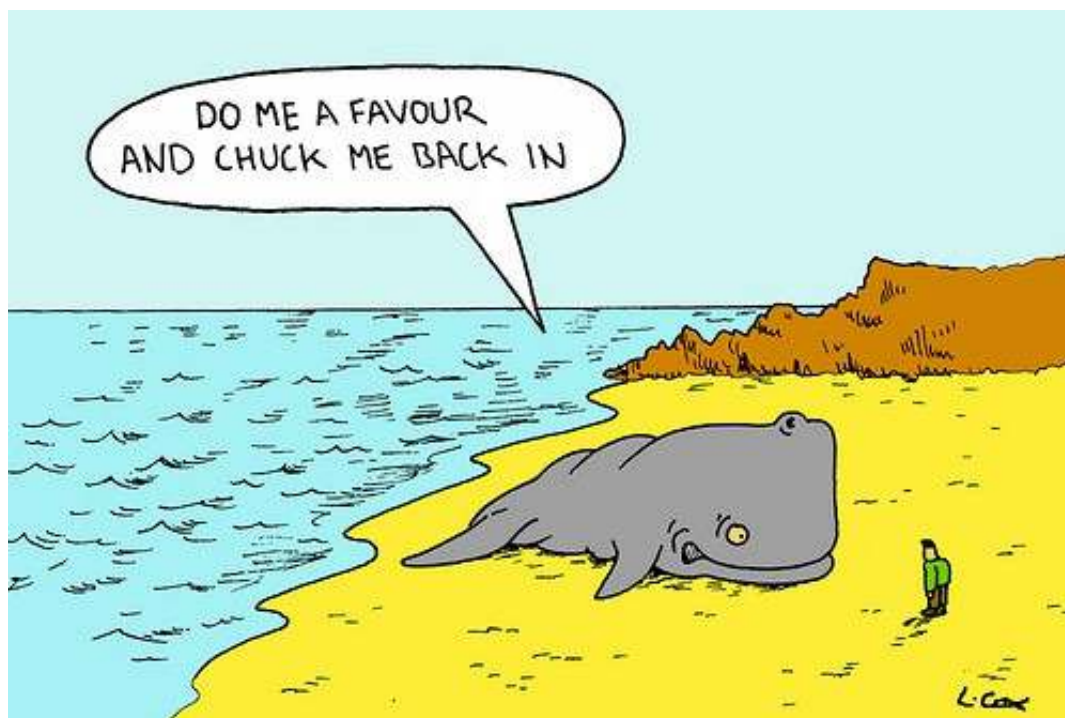
Fighting for more deep work in our lives means doing more of the things that are important to us and less of the things which aren't. At it's core, Cal's book reminds us that our days can and should be focused not just on "getting things done" but on "getting valuable things done".

In other words, both efficiency **and** effectiveness are requirements for meaningful and purposeful action that leads to a productive life, filled with energy and balance.

What follows are my brief notes on Cal's main points and suggestions.

## Deep Work Summary

### Drowning in the Shallows



The breadth of and our access to network tools (physical: open plan offices, meetings / digital: email, instant messaging, social media etc...)

has greatly increased, but our ability to pick selectively among and effectively use them has not.

Instead we tend to adopt tools that offer any benefit at all without carefully weighing those benefits against their disadvantages and opportunity costs – i.e., the time we could be spending on activities that are more valuable (we basically end up on the wrong side of [Pareto's 80/20 principle](#)).

Additionally, we are surrounded by distractions which are in fierce, active competition for and have become very effective at capturing our attention (advertising, messaging, social media, mobile apps, television, internet etc...). Willpower is a finite resource (see [Ego depletion](#)) and the reward of giving in to these distractions creates powerful habits of instant gratification.

A bias for instant gratification is dangerous because shallow work is so much cognitively easier than deep work. Attending meetings, becoming a human email router and ticking off shallow to dos all provide momentary satisfaction and an illusion of business but this comes at the expense of deep thought, value creation and a wider sense of meaning in our work.

Meanwhile, we have shifted culturally into the habit of making work the centre of our lives. We have come to view our free-time as simply the sub- and post-script to our days/weeks and so we spend more and more time working. There is, however, no evidence for an equivalent gain in productivity (see [Parkinson's law](#)).

In fact, 37Signals is an example of one company that has successfully experimented with [reducing the work week to four days and cutting out June](#) without any meaningful reduction in value creation.

## Into the deep

*Three to four hours of continuous, undisturbed deep work each day is all that it takes to see a transformational change in our productivity and our lives.*

To those hoping to put some of these habits into practice I would suggest focussing on one initiative at a time and having patience. You wouldn't try and run a marathon on your first run, likewise, building a commitment to increasingly productive deep work means working on our brain's dad bod. It is a slow process of habit forming and increasing mental fitness.

All personal change demands time, effort, persistence and discipline as well as the temporary discomfort of changing not only our own mindsets but also the expectations and mindsets of those around us.

### **1. Learn to categorise tools and tasks as deep or shallow:**

Cal devotes several pages to some good, practical examples that work through through the following process:

1. Identify a desired big-picture outcome in a particular area of life (family, friends, health, wealth, work etc...)
2. Identify just two or three activities that contribute the most towards this outcome (see [Pareto's 80/20 principle](#))
3. For each tool or task that currently consumes time and energy in this area of life, ask ourselves: "Is this tool or task integral to the activities that help me make progress towards my desired outcomes?"
4. If the answer is no then quit the tool or task

Though our goals and circumstances are personal, the majority of us will find that many of the tools and activities that we give our time and energy to fail to pass this simple test.

For example, is it better to spend two hours catching up on the life developments of all our FaceBook friends or to go out with one or two

close friends for dinner? Unless our career or personal circumstances depend on maintaining a broad network through frequent, light communication the answer is clear.

Giving up tools and tasks entirely might seem extreme but remember; [willpower is finite](#) and the danger inherent in these distractions extends beyond the time that we use them to the focus-destroying habits we form through them.

For a quick quantitative guideline on how deep a piece of work is, ask: “How many months would it take to train a smart graduate student with no experience in my domain to do this task?”. This rule of thumb can help to keep us honest about whether to prioritise work on accounting presentations or attending process and update meetings vs. high impact ‘only-me’ activities.

## 2. Make quick structural changes that encourage deep work

Breaking and forming habits becomes much easier when we make quick, external structural changes that eliminate or introduce the cues that trigger them. These changes help make new habits the course of least resistance and most importantly they eliminate the roll of willpower in falling back into old ones.

Here are the structural changes Cal suggests we make to simplify our lives and help us work more deeply:

1. Disable *all* incoming call/message notifications and badges  
*In the last 10 years, including three years as an analyst at McKinsey, I’ve never missed a single professional or personal call or message that couldn’t wait.*
2. Become hard to reach  
[Set sender filters](#), filter emails with rules and use auto-responders to manage reply expectations. Ask people to respect your time and

*energy and they will.*

### 3. [Quit social media](#)

*Experiment first with a secret, total 30 day social media fast if that helps. Like Cal I haven't used social media in 8 years and my life has been much richer for it.*

### 4. Work in a quiet place

*Open-plan offices are the bane of deep work; a private room or library is best, [noise cancelling headphones](#) and [music without words](#) will do in a pinch.*

### 5. Work at a quiet time

*Ask the most effective people you know when they wake up. It will be early, when there's nobody else up to disturb them.*

### 6. Limit internet access during deep work time

- Gather everything needed before beginning a session of deep work
- Alternate on and offline work time (see [Pomodoro technique](#))
- Block problem websites during working hours (check out [Freedom](#))

## **3. Get visibility on deep vs. shallow time by minuting the day:**

The first step to changing anything is to measure it.

Start keeping an honest record (on paper / in your calendar) of how time is actually being spent during each day.

Review this record at the end of the day to get a sense of how much time is really being spent on deep vs. shallow work.

## **4. Determine a fixed end point to the work day and stick to it**

### **1. Reframe our day towards our free-time instead of our work.**

Even if we enjoy our work we shouldn't forget that financial gain is only a means to an end, not an end in itself.

If you could retire tomorrow what would you do with your free-time?  
Start seeing the time outside of work as if you were already retired.

## 2. **Commit to a fixed end time to your day**

Make commitments to our children, book a yoga class, make plans with a friend, order a food delivery to our home etc...

Set a quitting time at the end of the day and do whatever it takes to make ourselves stick to it.

## 3. **Plan backwards**

Once we have a quitting time we can start fighting [Parkinson's law](#) (the tendency for work to expand to fill the time available to it)

Identify the things which have to get done to day and plan backwards

## 4. **Say no to shallow work and off-task commitments**

Run every incoming request through the process outlined at the start of these initiatives

Protect the end time by ruthlessly declining and then eliminating shallow work

## 5. **Train our attention**

As well as taking steps to eliminate shallow work from and introduce the conditions for deep work into our lives Cal also suggests a number of exercises to actively help strengthen our ability to effectively direct our attention.

Much like meditation, each of these exercises involves choosing a single object of focus, noticing when attention has wandered and then gently bringing attention back to the initial object. Beyond strong and consistent anecdotal evidence, such practices have [a proven physical impact on the attention centres of the brain](#):

### 1. Become friends with boredom

*When standing in line or waiting for a friend, resist the temptation to instantly distract the mind with needless activity. Instead practice just being in the present moment.*



## 2. Practice thinking whilst walking

*Get into the habit of practicing thinking on a single, well defined problem or topic that is important to you whilst engaged in a physical activity that doesn't require much mental exertion. This form of walking meditation not only improves attention but also has the added benefit of increasing productivity.*

## 3. Give the mind a work out with intense study or memorisation skills

*Spend time each day learning to to e.g., use your visual memory to [memorise a monologue](#) or pack of cards. These aren't just good tricks to impress friends at the pub. This kind of mental gymnastics also forces us to flex our attention muscles with far reaching implications for the rest of our lives.*

# Deep Work Contents

***Deep Work* has 7 main chapters in 2 parts...**

## **Part 1: The Idea**

1. Deep Work Is Valuable Chapter
2. Deep Work Is Rare Chapter
3. Deep Work Is Meaningful

## **Part 2: The Rules**

4. Rule #1: Work Deeply
5. Rule #2: Embrace Boredom
6. Rule #3: Quit Social Media
7. Rule #4: Drain the Shallows

# Best Deep Work Quotes

These Deep Work quotes come from **The Art of Living**'s ever-growing central library of thoughts, anecdotes, notes, and [inspirational quotes](#).

**"Deep Work: Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive abilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate."**

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

**"Shallow Work: Non-cognitively demanding, logistical style tasks, often performed while distracted. These efforts tend not to create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate."**

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

**"The Deep Work Hypothesis: The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy. As a consequence, the few who cultivate this skill, and then make it the core of their working life, will thrive."**

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

**"Part of what fuelled social media's rapid ascent... is its ability to short-circuit this connection between the hard work of producing real value and the positive reward of having people pay attention to you."**

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

**"For someone new to such [deep] practice ... an hour a day is a reasonable limit. For those familiar with the rigours of such activities, the limit expands to something like four hours, but rarely more."**

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

**"Treat shallow work with suspicion because its damage is often vastly underestimated and its importance vastly overestimated."**

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

**"Schedule every minute of your day... When you're done ... every minute should be part of a block. You have, in effect, given every minute of your workday a job. Now, as you go through your day, use this schedule to guide you."**

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

**"A deep work habit requires you to treat your time with respect."**

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

**"A tactic that works well for me [when declining low-value requests] is to be clear in my refusal but ambiguous in my explanation for the refusal."**

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

**"Fixed schedule productivity is a meta-habit that's simple to adopt but broad in its impact. If you have to choose just one behaviour that reorients your focus toward the deep, this one should be high on your list of opportunities."**

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

**"A commitment to deep work is not a moral stance and it's not a philosophical statement – it is instead a pragmatic recognition that the ability to concentrate is a skill that gets valuable things done."**

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

**"There's also an uneasiness that surrounds any effort to produce the**

*best things you're capable of producing, as this forces you to confront the possibility that your best is not (yet) that good."*

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

*"Three to four hours a day, five days a week of uninterrupted and carefully directed concentration, it turns out, can produce a lot of valuable output."*

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

*"To build your working life around the experience of flow produced by deep work is a proven path to deep satisfaction."*

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

*"[To understand where a task fits on the shallow-to-deep scale ask a simple question:] How long would it take (in months) to train a smart, recent college graduate with no specialised training in my field to complete this task?"*

- [Cal Newport](#), Deep Work

## Deep Work PDF Summary

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**Note:** Direct link to PDF. No email required.

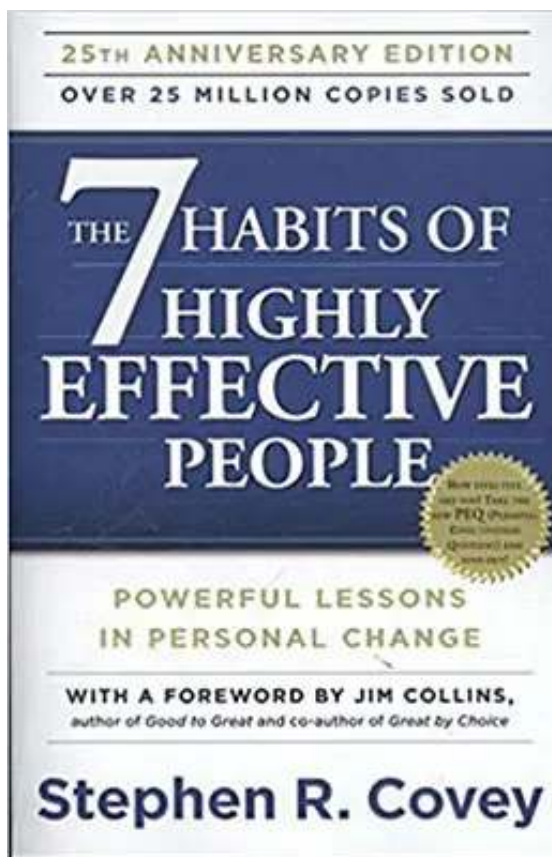
## Read More: 5 Books Like Deep Work

**Enjoyed this Deep Work summary?** You might enjoy the rest of the

books on these lists of the [Best Productivity Books](#) and [Best Self Help Books](#) of all time.

And in the meantime...

**Here are 5 top books like Deep Work...**



1. [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#) - [Stephen R. Covey](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

Powerful Lessons in Personal Change

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People is a perennial masterpiece on leading a happy, productive and purposeful existence and an unmissable stop for any pilgrim of personal improvement - by educator, author and speaker, Stephen Covey.

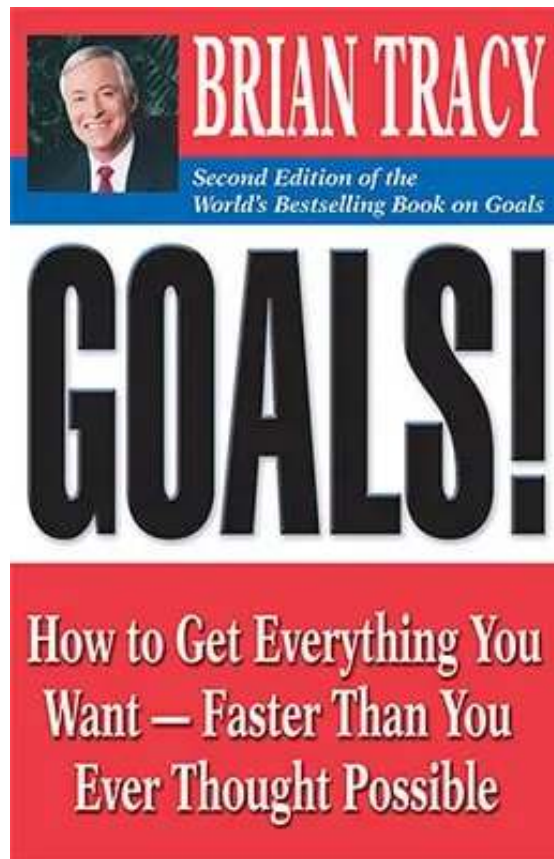
Published 1989 // 372 pages // Rated 4.1 over 624,500 reviews [on Goodreads](#)



## 2. [First Things First](#) – [Stephen R. Covey](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

First Things First is an action-oriented time-management manual, filled with frameworks and exercises to help you do more of what matters and less of what doesn't - by the author of the #1 book on this list, Stephen Covey.

Published 1993 // 384 pages // Rated 4.1 over 40,400 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

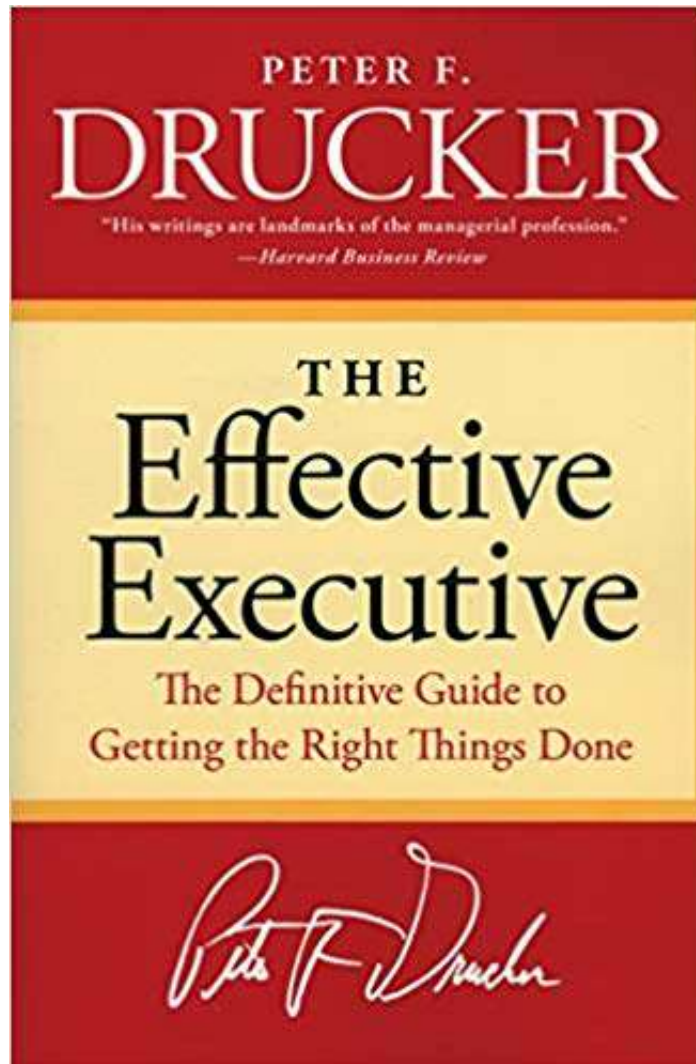


### 3. [Goals!](#) - [Brian Tracy](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

How to Get Everything You Want Faster Than You Ever Thought Possible

Goals! was the first book I ever read on productivity and probably the most readable and complete guide to goal-setting ever written - by sales legend and time-management master, Brian Tracy.

Published 1989 // 291 pages // Rated 4.2 over 14,200 reviews [on Goodreads](#)



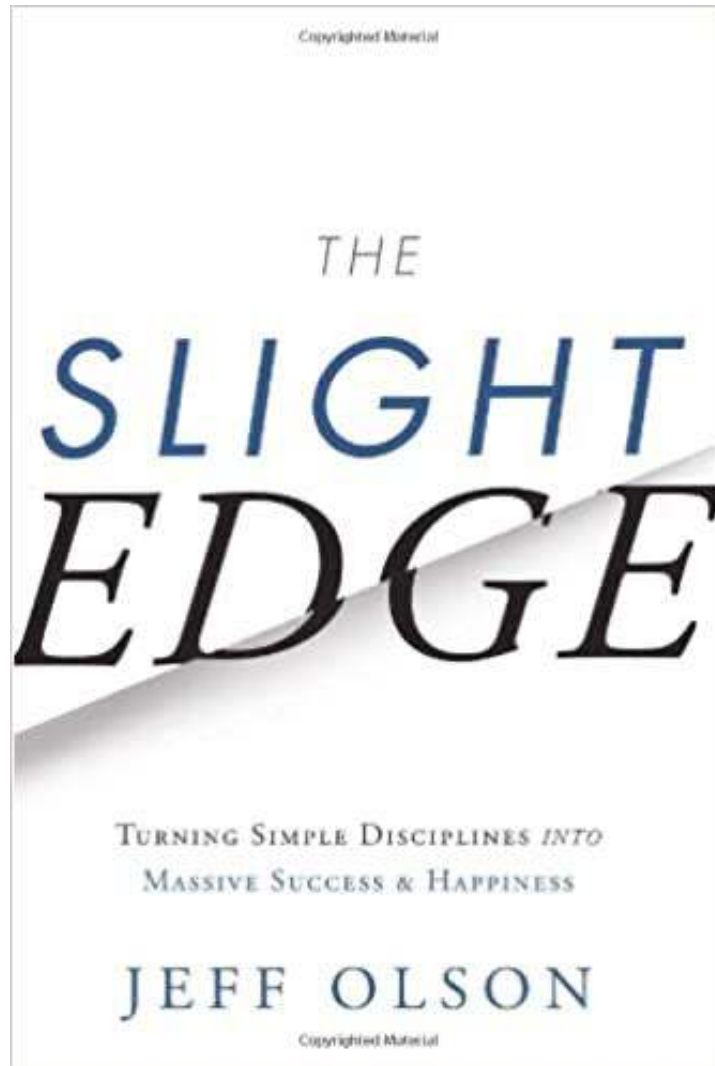
#### 4. [The Effective Executive](#) - [Peter F. Drucker](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done

The Effective Executive is THE timeless classic on leadership and management; on getting the right things done - by the dean of business and management philosophy, Peter F. Drucker.

Published 1966 // 208 pages // Rated 4.1 over 32,700 reviews [on Goodreads](#)





## 5. [The Slight Edge](#) - [Jeff Olson](#) ([FREE Summary](#))

Turning Simple Disciplines Into Massive Success & Happiness

The Slight Edge is a short, punchy, practical guide to the why, what and how of using simple daily disciplines to achieve breakthrough success - by serial entrepreneur, speaker and author, Jeff Olson.

Published 2005 // 168 pages // Rated 4.3 over 21,900 reviews [on Goodreads](#)

## **Wish There Was a Faster/Easier Way?**

Whenever you're ready, here are four ways I can help you be more productive, find more balance and live life more on purpose...

1. **Curious? Discover how productive you really are...** Take this free, 2-minute assessment to unlock your PQ and discover the top 25 habits you need to get big things done. [Take the 2-minute quiz →](#)
2. **Overwhelmed? Get a free chapter of my book...** Let me show you how to beat procrastination, permanently, with this free sneak peek inside **TAoL**'s ultimate productivity primer. [Download your free chapter →](#)
3. **Stuck? Grab a 90-Day TRACKTION Planner...** Get the tool thousands trust to help them take control of their time, master their habits and hit goals in every part of their lives. [Order your 90-day planner →](#)
4. **Burned out? Join the TRACKTION Community...** Take the 6-week masterclass, get weekly group coaching, find accountability partners and connect with like-minded self-starters. [Get started FREE →](#)

### [Arthur Worsley](#)

I founded **TAoL** to discover and share the best wisdom on how to live long and prosper. Before that I studied Psychology, Philosophy & Physiology at Oxford and consulted at McKinsey. **Still curious?** [Learn more](#) or [take my FREE productivity quiz](#).