Design Thinking and Deep Work:

The Key to Solving Problems and Avoiding Burnout

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Executive Summary

The field of design is seeing a decline in quality as designers are becoming more burnt out than ever and struggling to produce novel ideas. This problem can be attributed to the lack of concentrated energy dedicated to finding the root problems and developing an appropriate solution. Designers can use various approaches to change this trend, but the most effective are Design Thinking and deep work. These techniques assist in problem-solving and project management while also being mindful of personal and professional boundaries. This paper explores the specific ways they can be implemented and why they are so effective.

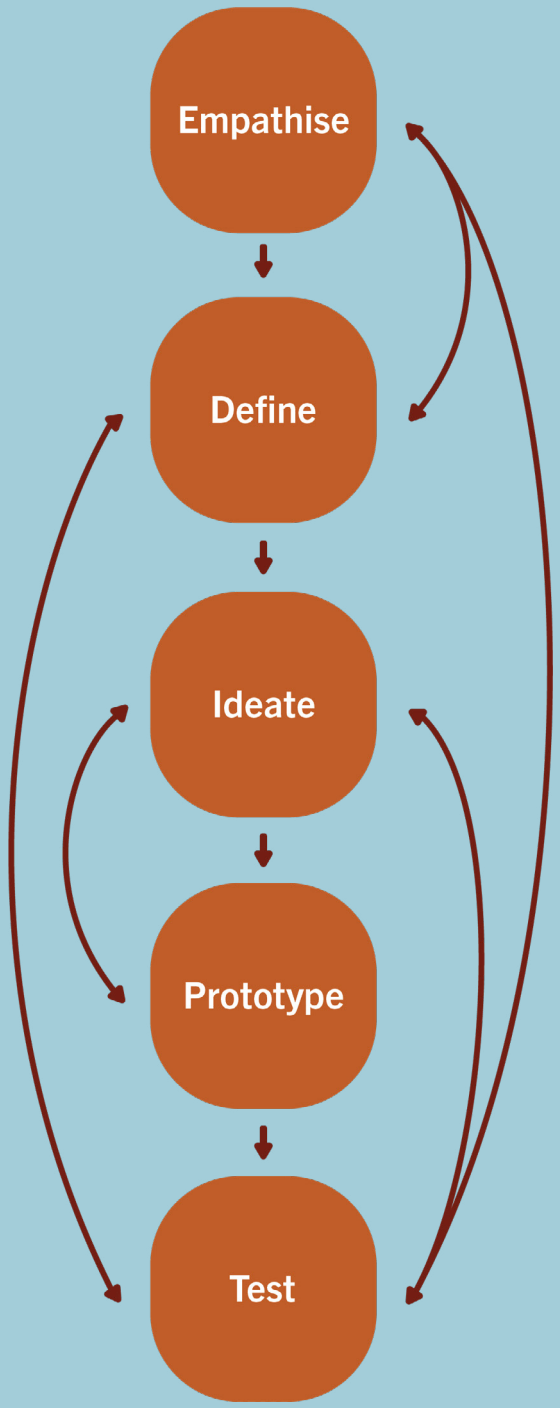
The Scope

Design is suffering from a lack of concentrated attention, and designers are falling victim to burnout with increasing frequency. These trends result in poorly defined visual concepts and a lack of novelty which are detrimental to effective communication. However, this trend is not at the fault of designers. Much of it can be attributed to a shift in both social and professional mindsets. Professionals in all fields are falling victim to what Cal Newport (2016) calls the Principle of Least Resistance. He writes, “In a business setting, without clear feedback on the impact of various behaviors to the bottom line, we will tend toward behaviors that are easiest in the moment.” This results in a lot of time spent on tiring but straightforward tasks such as answering emails and little time or energy left for more demanding work.

Work can be broken into two categories, deep work and shallow work, which Cal Newport (2016) initially establishes in his book Deep Work. Deep work is “professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.” Conversely, shallow work is “noncognitively demanding, logical-style tasks, often performed while distracted. These efforts tend not to create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate.” Deep work requires a lot of energy, but because of the principle of least resistance, it is often left until shallow work tasks are complete when energy is low.

A closely related approach to work and productivity is the Design Thinking Process. Rikke Dam and Teo Siang define design thinking as “an iterative process in which we seek to understand the user, challenge assumptions, and redefine problems in an attempt to identify alternative strategies and solutions that might not be instantly apparent with our initial level of understanding.” Design thinking is highly relevant to graphic design because practical design is often synonymous with thorough problem-solving.

As this approach to problem-solving continues to diminish, the effects are becoming increasingly apparent. Design is present in everything, so the impact of this can be seen in almost anything. This is made evident by the number of interfaces produced that are frustrating to use because poor design results in confusion and inaccessibility. If this continues, there will be a nearly infinite array of mediocre products. It will also result in continued burnout in designers who will find it increasingly difficult to enjoy their occupations and will likely never broach their fullest potential. Burnout often leads designers to skip steps in the Design Thinking process, which exacerbates the problem.



History

The Design Thinking process consists of five steps: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test. What is most important to note about design thinking is that while there are clearly defined steps, they are non-linear and should be revisited as needed. Empathizing allows the designer to understand the problem in more depth. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the problem, it is necessary to understand the various ways it can cause issues. This usually requires framing the task at hand from the point of view of someone else. This is extremely difficult because it requires the designer to shed their instincts and internalize the intuitive process of someone else.

After empathizing, it is helpful to define the problem. This gives the designer and anyone else working on the situation a written statement for reference that identifies specific issues that need to be addressed. Defining may sound simple after empathizing but putting the obstacles into words is often exceedingly difficult. Pinpointing problems can reveal an array of other factors that require revisiting the empathize phase. Empathizing and defining are the ideal starting points for the Design Thinking process because trying to solve a problem before fully understanding it is rarely effective. They create a strong foundation for the rest of the project but require a lot of energy.

The next step in the process is to ideate; another demanding task. The goal of ideation is to come up with as many potential solutions as possible. The most important part of this step is to accept all ideas before assessing whether they are “good” or not. Radical acceptance in the initial part of this phase is essential because the first few ideas produced are usually heavily influenced by what we know and are already familiar with. This occurrence is an example of the principle of least resistance; we often first attempt to recreate the familiar before creating something novel.

The next step in the Design Thinking process is prototyping. This step requires taking concepts from the ideation phase and turning them into models of the potential final product. Because the ideation process is based on radical acceptance, this can be particularly challenging because many of the more exciting ideas are often the most difficult to execute. To be successful in this step requires vast amounts of concentration and problem solving, which can be augmented with the application of deep work techniques discussed later.

> “It is only when we understand the fundamental nature of the problem that it is eradicated.”
>
> Joshua Fields Millburn

The final step of the design thinking process is testing. In this step, the prototype is put to work to determine whether it is an effective solution. This step largely relies on astute observation as the goal is to find issues with the proposed solution. This step is also the most likely to require that previous steps are revisited. When a problem comes up, and they always do, one of the most effective ways to approach it is to identify in which phase it should have first been addressed. Once that has been identified, a new solution can be proposed, and the Design Thinking process begins again.

Such a process is highly demanding, and it is not uncommon to see burnout in designers because of this. Such a predicament did not pop up overnight. One of the origins lies in the shift from analog to digital systems for designers. As this change occurred, the role of the designer changed as well. Designers became responsible for responding almost instantly to feedback on their work. The digitization of the critique process eliminates much of the vital conversation that occurs when meetings occur in person.

Critique relates to the design thinking process in a unique way. It is often viewed as a form of the testing step. While designers may not test the content formally, it is considered as if it were in its final form so adequate adjustments can be made. The most effective critiques are often highly interactive with constructive feedback. This can lead the session to take the form of the ideation process as designers brainstorm new ways to approach the issue or alter the content before them.

However, it is not easy to institute such a productive critique session. This utilization of the design thinking process calls for deep work to assist in its functionality. During a critique session, it is essential to avoid distraction because it can disrupt the train of thought of everyone involved. It is also helpful to write ideas as they come so they can be revisited at an appropriate time rather than disrupting the session to discuss a point that is not currently relevant.

When broken down further, design thinking and deep work often pair well with other project management systems such as the Kanban technique. This system uses cards to track and sort information. Many designers use this in the form of sticky notes with ideas on them. Sticky notes are famous because they are easy to sort into categories and move around as necessary. They don't allow for much elaboration, which is ideal for ideation because the goal is to produce as much as possible in a relatively limited amount of time.

> **"Talent is not a commodity that you can buy in bulk and combine to reach the needed levels: There's a premium to being the best."**
>
> Cal Newport, Deep Work (2016)

Digital platforms exist to replicate this and are popular among people that work in teams or many different locations because they make sharing content and updates easier. Many social media platforms could be viewed as a form of this technique because their ideas are rarely well developed. One drawback of using social media for a Kanban approach is that it does not allow users to change the order that content they upload appears in as they default to chronological order.

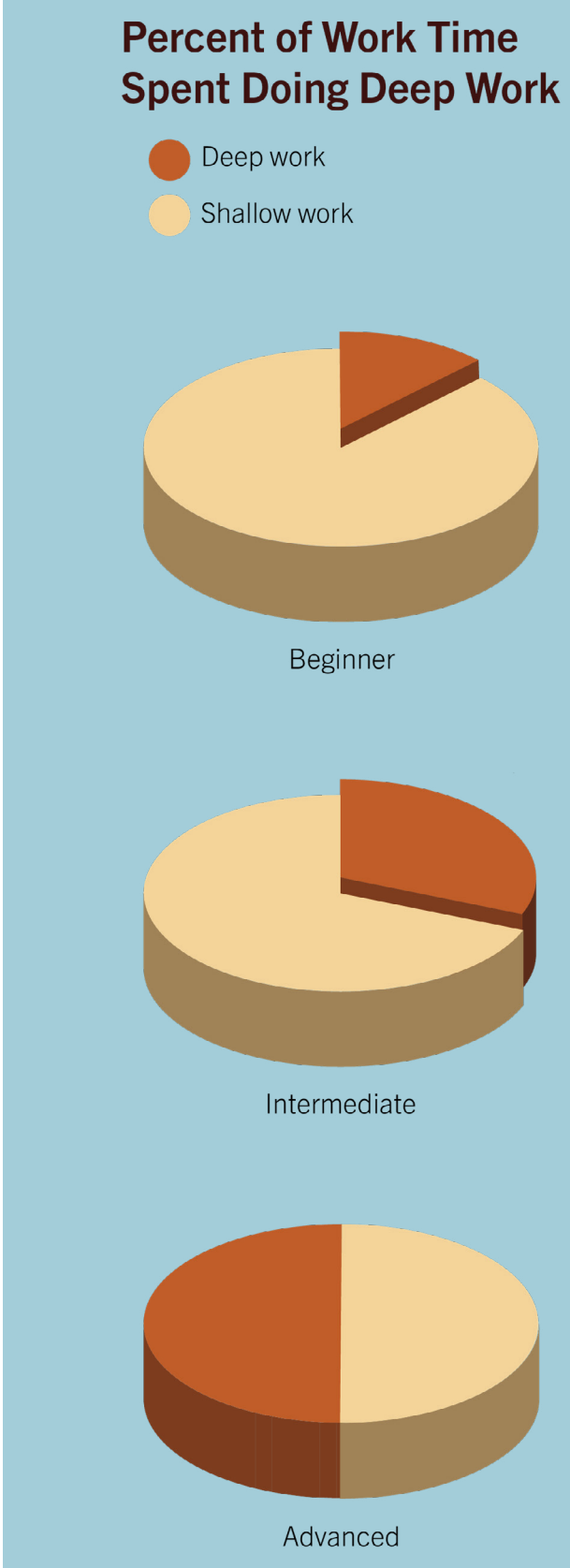
In addition to this, social media often serves for entertainment and could quickly become distracting in various ways. The most apparent distraction comes in the form of content produced by others. Most social media users participate in both consumption and production of content, but consumption can take vital time away from more important work. Additionally, social media metrics often push users toward what will gain more likes and work well in the algorithm. This feature is yet another distracting factor that takes away from the more significant potential.

One aspect of the algorithm that consumes many content creators is the reward for posting frequently. Focusing on this would disrupt the greater problem-solving goal as many people would fall victim to creating content to post for the sake of having something rather than taking the time that is necessary to design a more effective solution. It can also be harmful to push designers to post content every day outside of the context of project management systems or the primary focus of their work. These shallow tasks add up, leaving less energy to focus on more critical deep work.

Solution

An effective way to include more deep work in design is to approach our processes as designers from a Design Thinking standpoint. Doing such would address the leading causes of burnout and help develop more effective approaches to work as a whole. One of the most notable aspects of this method is that it is not a one size fits all solution. As each designer completes this personal research, they develop a personalized solution.

Many designers have done this. One of the most well-known is Stefan Sagmeister, a graphic designer, and typographer based in New York City. After assessing his productive work and burnout rates, he began experimenting with sabbaticals. He found that many of the most productive people in any field, not just design, took sabbaticals to refresh their minds and allow new ideas to flow. He now takes a yearlong sabbatical every seven years.



Unfortunately, not everyone has the luxury of scheduling a year out of the office, but other approaches are more viable and, arguably, equally effective. While Sagmeister plans in the larger scale of years, it can be helpful for more people to look at months, weeks, or even days. The renowned scholar Adam Grant goes by months, using half of the year to pursue his duties as a professor at Wharton School of Business at Penn and the other half doing research and writing scholarly articles and books. However, for most people planning by the week or day is more accessible.

Planning deep work in this way can take many forms, but the most popular is setting aside a few hours each morning to think deeply before pursuing other tasks. Most professionals adhere to setting aside time in the morning because it is before their day has started and leaves less room for getting caught up in the chaos that accompanies many designers' busy lives. Deciding on an ideal time and staying consistent is also beneficial because the more frequently it occurs in this manner, the more prepared your mind will be for such strenuous thinking. Approaching design and deep work in this way create a ritual that makes getting in the ever-elusive "zone" easier with practice.

Cal Newport (2016) notes the importance of rituals at the end of deep-thinking sessions and the end of the workday to create a formal end. This assists in keeping work at work and preventing designers from becoming overwhelmed and burnt out from constantly thinking about the project at hand. Many designers find themselves troubled with problems even when they are far removed from their work environment and become increasingly frustrated as they work on a project. The conscious mind needs a break from such intense topics so that the subconscious can digest them. The conscious mind can recharge and return to the problem with renewed energy and ideas when this occurs.

Rituals are also crucial because design is intensely personal. Everything a designer creates is the culmination of their previous experiences and knowledge. Although design work is rarely viewed in this way, it is vital to recognize it because it has an immense impact on both the designer and, in turn, the final product. Creating a ritual can help designers enter an appropriate mindset when they begin their work and prevent it from overwhelming the rest of their lives. A ritual can look different for everyone but should involve actively recognizing the start or finish of the day and be accompanied by a set of actions that are complete every time. One example of this could be setting up a workstation with the necessary tools, perhaps a laptop, charger, notepad, pen, and cup of coffee, followed by saying, "I am now ready to work." Rituals do not need to be complex to be effective; the repetition of the act uses Pavlov's Theory of Classical Conditioning to train the mind.

> **"It took me a few seconds to draw it, but it took me 34 years to learn how to draw it in a few seconds."**
>
> Paula Scher

In addition to instituting rituals, it can also be helpful to view design thinking as multitasking. A study by Shalena Srna, Rom Y. Shrift, and Gal Zauberman shows that multitasking often leads to better results. They found that participants were more focused on the task at hand because they expected it to require more effort and focus. The design thinking process can be considered in a similar manner; the overarching approach details five non-linear steps that can be returned to at any time and are also often considered concurrently.

The goals of deep work and Design Thinking align closely with the concept of Eudaimonia. The ancient Greeks believed that in this state, you are reaching your full human potential. Many people have studied this idea and have tried to develop ways to induce it. One of the most popular is David Dewane's machine. This machine is very different from what it is called to mind when we hear the word machine, though. Dewane's machine is an architectural design that essentially replicates design thinking and induces deep work in the form of a building.

The building has five rooms organized in a linear fashion so that you can only get to the end by passing through each one. Each room has a name and a purpose that can be related to a step of the design thinking process. The first room is the gallery, and its goal is to inspire users. The next room is the salon, a space for contemplation and initial research. Next is the library, which holds a permanent record of everything produced using the machine. This room serves as both inspiration and information for the project at hand. Next is the office, which is used for low-intensity research and necessary shallow work. The final room is a collection of smaller spaces called deep work chambers. These rooms are six feet by ten feet and soundproof. These rooms are intended to be used in ninety-minute intervals where one spends ninety minutes inside doing work and then takes a ninety-minute break. This is to be repeated two or three times for a total of three to four and a half hours of deep work.

While it does not align precisely with the steps of design thinking, the machine offers an ideal space for such an approach to problem-solving. One challenge of the machine is that it is strictly linear and therefore not conducive to revisiting steps. While this may not cause problems in some situations, it would be problematic from a Design Thinking standpoint. While it would be possible to go backward through the rooms, doing so would likely feel disjointed and disrupt deep thinking even further.

A more functional approach would be to use the same concept in a hub and spoke design. In this form, the gallery, salon, library, office, and deep work chambers are at the end of

> **"Human beings, it seems, are at their best when immersed deeply in something challenging."**
> Cal Newport, Deep Work (2016)

spokes, all connected by a hub. The hub would serve as an area in which to take breaks, resting the conscious mind and allowing the subconscious to digest the intense work that has been happening.

Hub and spoke models are often favored for their effectiveness in settings that require deep work and innovation. They are ideal because they provide private spaces for deep work in the spokes, but the hub allows people of different backgrounds to come together and bump into each other. Having a place to rest is essential, but more important is the presence of new content to keep the mind engaged. In the case of the hub and spoke, this content comes in the form of other projects. This exposure often inspires new approaches to other projects and results in solutions that would otherwise never have been reached.

Benefits

Implementing these approaches can assist in developing higher-quality designs that are more effective in reach and communication. They can also reduce burnout which will contribute to better designs. One of the most notable qualities of this approach is that it can be applied to both personal and professional life. While separating the two is essential for each to meet their most significant potential, the same methods can successfully be applied to both. Deep work and Design Thinking are incredibly versatile and can make approaching anything more manageable.

As these approaches are practiced, they will become easier with time. However, it is essential to note that using these methods at all times can be overwhelming. In Deep Work, Cal Newport (2016) notes that experts can spend up to four hours a day doing deep work before they can no longer function at their peak. For a novice, about an hour is often the maximum. With this in mind, it is essential to ease into these practices. The only way to get better at them is to exercise them frequently and intentionally with clear goals in mind.

Call-to-Action

A wide variety of methods have been explored throughout this paper, each with a different means to a similar end. What is most important to keep in mind is that their effectiveness often depends on the circumstances of various problems or individuals. The most effective way to find out if they work for you is to put them to the test. It is one thing to understand

the processes and methods from a theoretical standpoint, but carrying them out is entirely different. To be as effective as possible, it is best to test them rather than rely on the expected result. Another critical aspect of this is to be patient. Many of these processes take time and practice before their benefits or drawbacks are evident.

Conclusion

While these approaches are discussed in their application to design and as a combatant to burnout, they can be applied to nearly anything. To make progress in anything, it is essential to assess and reassess continually. Processes such as these are what allow for innovation. The only way to move forward is to recognize things that hold us back so that we can overcome them. These methods will not do any of the work for you, but they can assist you in creating novel solutions.

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