

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT SKILLS

The Deep Work Cohort

A standing weekly protocol for getting hard, valuable work done in a fractured environment.

Member handbook · \$97 per month

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WELCOME

What you have joined

This membership is for people whose most valuable work requires sustained concentration, and whose working conditions are actively hostile to it.

The problem is not usually that you cannot concentrate. It is that the structural defaults of modern work — notifications, open calendars, an expectation of rapid response — make sustained concentration the exception rather than the baseline. Willpower does not fix a structural problem. Protocol does.

What you get here is a weekly protocol, a set of session formats, and a monthly cadence to keep it honest.

What this is, honestly

This is a structured working protocol and membership. It is not coaching, therapy, or professional advice, and it contains nothing tailored to your individual circumstances. If you are struggling with concentration in a way that concerns you — persistent, worsening, or affecting daily functioning — that is worth raising with a doctor rather than treating as a productivity problem.

What arrives each month

When	What
Week 1	The month's protocol focus — one structural change to run for four weeks
Weekly	Session planning sheet and the deep work log
Weekly	The cohort session, if you are running one
Final week	The month's measurement and next month's focus

SECTION ONE

The protocol

Three fixed blocks a week, defended. Everything else in this handbook supports those three blocks.

Why three

One block a week is too few to build momentum, and whatever you were working on has to be reloaded from scratch each time — the re-entry cost consumes a large fraction of the session. Five or more is unsustainable for most people alongside a normal job, and the failure of an over-ambitious schedule tends to take the whole practice with it.

Three is enough for continuity between sessions and few enough to be genuinely defensible against a busy week.

Ninety minutes

Long enough that the first twenty minutes of settling in are not the whole session. Short enough to schedule and to sustain at genuine intensity. If ninety is impossible, sixty is a reasonable floor; below forty-five the re-entry cost dominates and you are mostly paying it rather than working.

The four conditions

A block only counts as a deep work block if all four hold. Three out of four is an ordinary working hour, which is fine but is not what this is.

1. **One task, decided before the block starts.** Deciding what to work on inside the block consumes the best part of it. The task is chosen at the end of the previous session.
2. **No inbound channel open.** Email closed, messaging closed, phone in another room — not face down, another room. Face down still works as a cue.
3. **A defined end.** A timer or a hard stop. Open-ended sessions drift and are harder to start next time, because your brain correctly predicts an unbounded commitment.
4. **A record afterwards.** Two lines in the log. This takes thirty seconds and is what makes the practice improvable rather than just repeated.

MY THREE BLOCKS

Block	Day	Time	Where
1			
2			
3			

What comes out of my week to make room:

Who needs to know these blocks exist:

Tell people

Blocks defended silently get colonised, because from the outside they look like free time. A single sentence — "I am heads-down Tuesday and Thursday mornings, back to you after eleven" — prevents most of it. Colleagues almost universally accept this; the resistance people anticipate rarely materialises.

SECTION TWO

Choosing what goes in the block

The blocks are expensive. Filling them with work that did not need them is the most common way this practice becomes pointless.

Deep work blocks should hold work that is hard and valuable — the work that only gets done properly with sustained attention and that meaningfully moves something. Admin is neither. Email is neither. Anything you could do competently in fifteen-minute fragments does not belong here.

The two-by-two

	Low value	High value
Shallow	Eliminate or batch	Batch into a defined admin slot
Deep	Interesting but pointless — be ruthless	This is what the blocks are for

The dangerous quadrant is deep and low value: genuinely absorbing work that does not move anything. Research that will not change a decision, a refactor nobody needs, over-polishing something already finished. It feels exactly like productive deep work from the inside, which is what makes it expensive.

WORK SORT

Deep and high value — candidates for the blocks:

Deep and low value — what I enjoy that is not moving anything:

Shallow — what goes into a batched admin slot instead:

Decide at the end of the previous session

The most useful habit in this membership. In the last two minutes of each block, write the task for the next one — specifically enough that you could start without thinking. "Work on chapter three" is not specific enough. "Rewrite the opening of chapter three from the argument outline" is.

This removes the single largest source of wasted session time and it costs two minutes.

SECTION THREE

Session formats

Four formats for different kinds of work. Using the wrong one is a common reason a block feels unproductive despite the time being protected.

Build

For producing new material. One task, no editing, no research. If you hit a gap, mark it and continue rather than stopping to resolve it. Research mid-build is the most common way a build session becomes a reading session.

Think

For problems with no obvious next action. Paper, not a screen. Start by writing the problem as a question, then write badly for the full block without evaluating. Expect it to feel unproductive for the first thirty minutes; that is the normal shape, not a sign the session is failing.

Refine

For improving something that already exists. The opposite constraints to build: slow, critical, one pass with one focus. Do not attempt structure and wording in the same pass — pick one.

Learn

For acquiring something difficult. Active rather than passive. Read a section, close it, write what you understood from memory, then check. Reading without retrieval feels like learning and mostly is not.

SESSION PLAN

Date	Format	The one task	Done when

SECTION FOUR

Handling the interruptions

Most interruptions are self-generated, which is good news — those are the ones you can do something about.

The capture sheet

A sheet of paper beside you. When something unrelated surfaces — an errand, an email you should send, an idea for something else — write one line and return to the task. Do not act on it, do not open a tab.

This works because the urge is usually about not losing the thought rather than about acting on it now. Capturing it discharges that, and the sheet gets dealt with after the block. Most people find half of what they captured was not worth doing.

The restart rule

You will break the protocol — check something, open a tab, answer a message. The useful response is not to abandon the session. Note the time, close the thing, and continue. A ninety-minute block with one six-minute lapse is a good session. Treating the lapse as a failure that ends the block converts a small loss into a total one.

Genuine external interruptions

Some are real and unavoidable. Two rules: handle it and return rather than letting it end the session, and note it in the log. A pattern of the same interruption three weeks running is a structural problem to solve rather than bad luck to absorb.

INTERRUPTION AUDIT · ONE MONTH

Date	What interrupted	Self-generated or external?

The one that recurs most — what structural change would end it?

SECTION FIVE

The cohort session

Optional and effective. Working alongside other people, even silently and remotely, measurably increases the odds that the block happens at all.

Format

Two to six people, same time each week, ninety minutes. Five minutes at the start where each person states their one task. Eighty minutes of silence — cameras on if remote, nobody speaking. Five minutes at the end where each person says what they got done.

The mechanism is not supervision. It is that you said out loud what you were going to do and will be asked about it in ninety minutes, and that starting is easier when other people are visibly starting.

Three rules

- **No talking in the middle.** None. A single clarifying question costs everyone their state.
- **Arrive with the task decided.** The opening five minutes is for stating it, not choosing it.
- **Report honestly at the end.** "I got distracted and did about twenty minutes" is a useful report. Inflated reports make the whole session decorative.

COHORT SET-UP

Who:

When and where:

Who starts and ends the silence:

SECTION SIX

Measuring it

Count blocks completed, not hours at a desk. The distinction is the entire point.

Hours at a desk is the metric most people default to and it measures almost nothing — it is satisfied by a day of fragmented attention. Blocks completed under the four conditions measures the thing that actually produces output.

The two numbers

Blocks completed per week. Target three. A block counts only if all four conditions held.

Quality, one to five, recorded immediately. Not how much you produced — how much of the block was genuinely absorbed. People are reasonably accurate about this if they record it within a minute of stopping and hopeless about it a day later.

DEEP WORK LOG

Date	Mins	Task	Qual	What helped or got in the way

Month end

MONTHLY REVIEW

Blocks completed this month, out of twelve:

Average quality:

Which block in the week most often survives, and which most often dies:

What got finished this month that would not have otherwise:

One structural change for next month:

APPENDIX

Twelve monthly protocol focuses

One structural change per month, run for four weeks. Structural changes stick; resolutions do not.

Month	Focus	The change
1	Establish the three	Three blocks in the calendar, defended, nothing else changes
2	Decide in advance	Next task written in the last two minutes of every block
3	Close the channels	Phone in another room; email client closed, not minimised
4	Batch the shallow	One defined admin slot a day; nothing shallow outside it
5	Capture, do not chase	Capture sheet on every block; review after, not during
6	Audit the low-value deep	Identify and cut the absorbing work that moves nothing
7	Match format to work	Name the session format before every block
8	Protect the best hours	Move the hardest block into your highest-capacity window
9	Shorten the re-entry	End each block mid-task rather than at a clean stopping point
10	Add the fourth block	Only if three have held for two consecutive months
11	Fix the recurring interruption	Solve the one that shows up most in the audit
12	Review the year's output	What exists now that would not without the blocks

Month nine is counter-intuitive and worth trying

Stopping mid-sentence, mid-function, mid-argument — at a point where you know exactly what comes next — makes the following session dramatically faster to start. Stopping at a clean break feels tidier and means next time you begin with the hardest part, which is working out where you were.

Twelve-month record

Mo	Blocks / 12	Avg quality	What got finished
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			

The one-page summary

Three ninety-minute blocks a week, in the calendar, and tell people they exist. One task per block, decided at the end of the previous one. No inbound channels, a defined end, two lines in the log. Put only deep and high-value work in them, and be ruthless about the absorbing work that moves nothing. Capture distractions on paper rather than chasing them, and never let one lapse end a session. Count blocks, not hours. Change one structural thing a month.

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