

How to Work Alone

4 skills needed when you work in solitude.

By Paul Jun

Being in a space that's free from distractions while managing your time and output sounds like freedom (and is the fantasy of nearly everyone in an "open office"). But working alone isn't some magical cure-all. As soon as you get into the groove of working alone, you realize that you aren't alone and the battle was never external; it's internal.

Luckily, working remotely is a relatively new luxury. Working alone, however, is something that people of all trades and crafts have been doing for millennia.

Working alone is about creating the space where intense concentration becomes easily accessible. When finally alone, it's easy to allow a wave of self-doubt and insecurities to begin to flood your mind. Sitting in solitude for even five minutes makes you get up to grab a snack. Or to check Twitter. And perhaps the most challenging of all, you don't know when to call it a day; the constant polish and re-polishing when your energy is low masquerades as productivity — or so it goes if you're not prepared.

If you begin to work alone with only the toolset you have from working in an office, you may run into some trouble. Thus, working alone requires mastering a few key skills:

Skill #1: Silencing the inner demons and going with the flow.

In his book *The Inner Game of Tennis: The Classic Guide to the Mental Side of Peak Performance*, W. Thomas Gallwey talks about the game of tennis, but really the book is about how to quiet the mind.

He believes that weak athletic performance and bad art all stems from the same seed: *overthinking*. He explains:

We have arrived at a key point: it is the constant "thinking" activity of Self 1, the ego-mind, which causes interference with the natural capabilities of Self 2. Harmony between the two selves exists when this mind is quiet and focused. Only then can peak performance be reached.

When a tennis player is "in the zone," he is not thinking about how, when or even where to hit the ball. He's not trying to hit the ball, and after the shot he doesn't think about how badly or how well he made contact. The ball seems to get hit through a process which doesn't require thought. There may be an awareness of the sight, sound and feel of the ball, and even of the tactical situation, but the player just seems to know without thinking what to do.

This concept is synonymous to *flow*, a term coined by the pioneering psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He interviewed a multitude of artists and scientists in *Creativity: The Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, and discovered that there were nine elements that entranced a person into a state of flow.

1. *There are clear goals every step of the way.*
2. *There is immediate feedback to one's actions.*
3. *There is a balance between challenges and skills.*
4. *Action and awareness are merged.*
5. *Distractions are excluded from consciousness.*
6. *There is no worry of failure.*
7. *Self-consciousness disappears.*
8. *The sense of time becomes distorted.*
9. *The activity becomes autotelic.*

Even a firm understanding on this doesn't stop those pesky demons from showing up. What sets you up for success – to get into a state of flow so you can quiet your mind and do the work.

Getting to this state is the goal of any creative work session. If you've worked in an office doing mostly reactive work, you may forget what this even feels like.

That is, your work must be challenging enough to keep you engaged but easy enough to prevent frustration. Additionally, an ability to allow this “deep work” to occur requires you to be vigilant about outside interruptions. Which brings us to...

Skill #2: The ability to face distractions head on.

As Pablo Picasso said, “Without great solitude no serious work is possible.”

What is it about solitude that allows us to do our work? Why can't it be “without great coffee” or “without great power-naps no serious work is possible”?

Being alone can often feel like being pushed in front of a big mirror that plays back our errors and experiences we may not be proud of. It's hard to ignore our flaws, even when we know everybody has them. When we're in a social setting, there's an atmosphere of stimulus to distract us from thinking about ourselves; we're curious about other people's thoughts and how they're viewing us. When we're alone, we can't help but tune in to the voices that readily get muted.

Solitude goes from a bully to a teammate; from something that makes you squirm to something that becomes the bedrock for intense concentration and creativity. There are no right answers and this is perhaps the most difficult habit to attain, but it's worth it.

Try these practices to help you deflect distractions and to learn how to use solitude to your advantage.

Listen to sounds of nature:

I've discovered that ambient sounds help me achieve this state of flow more quickly. It overpowers my self-defeating thoughts. According to Greg Ciotti, “Researchers have shown that a moderate noise level can get creative juices flowing, but the line is easily crossed; loud noises made it incredibly difficult to

concentrate. Bellowing basses and screeching synths will do you more harm than good when engaging in deep work.”

Apps like Noisli are my secret sauce. Once I plug my headphones in and hear the sounds of rainfall, birds chirping, or a fireplace crackling, I can feel distractions fading. It calms the storm of thoughts in my mind and allows me to focus on the task at hand, and lessens the likelihood of a coworker or coffee barista jarring you out of your concentrative state.

Accept imperfection:

A question worth asking is, “Does anyone swiftly move from start to finish like the wave of a brushstroke? Is there anyone that doesn’t face distractions?”

No. Then why ask the impossible? We have a fantasy of working in solitude for hours on end, uninterrupted and pure. But such a scenario is unlikely (and not even all that more conducive to productivity than your current one). Don’t chase an “ideal” work environment, accept what you have. Once you let this reality simmer, it’s easier to get to work. Rather than fighting the notion that you have to work effortlessly in order to get work done, you can soon accept the reality that deflecting distractions is part of the creative process. The more you show up in this space of working alone, the easier solitude becomes.

Skill #3: The ability to know when the day is done.

The renowned author Haruki Murakami wakes up at 4:00 a.m. and works for five to six hours straight, according to Mason Currey in *Daily Rituals*. In the afternoon he runs or swims, does errands, reads, and listens to music. Bedtime is 9:00 p.m.

“I keep to this routine every day without variation,” he told *The Paris Review* in 2004. “The repetition itself becomes the important thing; it’s a form of mesmerism. I mesmerize myself to reach a deeper state of mind.”

In the *War of Art*, Steven Pressfield describes his morning routine for facing, and overcoming, the Resistance. He rises early, eats his breakfast, and is in his office by 10:30 a.m. He plunges in and writes until he starts making typos — this is a cue that he’s getting tired and has been at it for about four hours.

He continues by saying:

“I’ve hit the point of diminishing returns. I wrap for the day. Copy whatever I’ve done to disk and stash the disk in the glove compartment of my truck in case there’s a fire and I have to run for it. I power down. It’s three, three-thirty. The office is closed. How many pages have I produced? I don’t care. Are they any good? I don’t even think about it. All that matters is I’ve put in my time and hit it with all I’ve got. All that counts is that, for this day, for this session, I have overcome Resistance.”

The lesson is simple: When you’re clear about your boundaries, you know in your gut when the day’s work is done. A “normal” salaried job typically has defined hours. But as anyone who has experienced the 3 p.m. oh-my-god-I-need-coffee sensation, long hours do not always equal lots of output.

Take advantage of your solitude. Be very clear and deliberate about what you should, can't, or wouldn't do. Without boundaries while being alone, you will work into the night with dark circles under your eyes, falling under the seductive illusion that you're being productive. You're dogged, yes, but at what cost?

You have to determine when the day's work is done so you can let the unconscious part of your mind do its work, too. Whether this is based on a time of day, a cue like making excessive typos or mouth-tearing yawns, you are the custodian of your output.

Skill #4: The ability to find your natural habitat.

I envy people who are able to work at coffee shops, especially people who don't even use headphones to block out laughter and chatter. Their eyes are sharp like a snake and nothing outside of that 11-inch screen can seduce their attention. Like a polar bear switching with a grizzly bear, it's a mismatch in preference and predisposition. It took me many failed attempts to learn that I will never be the type of writer to work out of that environment. I blame my parents, but I'll be fine.

Some people feel this way about working from their room – right in front of the bed and down comforter and fluffy cold pillows. Which is why some carve out an office space in their home or build one in their backyard.

If an animal doesn't return to their natural habitat, they're in danger. Luckily for us it's not that grim. We can learn through experimentation which environments are best suited for us at specific times of the day.

For example, if my intense creative labor is done in the mornings, I prefer my room. But the later half of the day – which is dedicated to reading, editing, and emails – can be done anywhere: the park, the library, or my friend's kitchen counter while I'm standing. This works for me. Experiment to see what works for you. Again, half the fun of working alone is doing it on your terms. Don't let any productivity blog tell you the "right" way to work.

Keeping a pulse on your natural habitat takes self-awareness – you need to keep tabs on your mood and productivity when you're in different environments. Rather than being in that environment because it feels good, it also has to facilitate the flow of your work, too.

When you find solitude in your natural habitat so you can become mesmerized into a state of flow, when you accept distractions as part of the process and are clear about the day's finish line, working alone becomes an enriching catalyst for creative labor.