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8-28-2022

## How Then Shall We Work: Should Christian Engineers Pursue Productivity?

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### Recommended Citation

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## How Then Shall We Work: Should Christian Engineers Pursue Productivity?

### Abstract

Technology critics like Neal Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*) and Nicholas Carr (*The Shallows*) have long held forth that our technology shapes us. In recent years, philosophers (including some that have presented at past Christian Engineering Conferences) have explored the value-ladenness of engineering design and how the biases in our technology affect us on a daily basis. A “hidden in plain sight” technology that we interact with everyday is our approach to getting things done, or our “productivity system.” While everyone has a productivity system, that is, a way of organizing, prioritizing, and executing tasks, some have thought more explicitly about their system than others. Author Cal Newport has popularized a time management system consisting of phases for Capture, Configure, and Control, as well as planning at different timescales. This productivity approach provides knowledge workers with the tools to get more things done in less time. The engineering design norms have provided a useful framework for considering the non-neutrality of technology. We apply them to evaluate the Capture, Configure, Control productivity system and consider whether Christians should buy into the notion of productivity in general and this system in particular.

### Keywords

technology, philosophy, industrial productivity, work

### Disciplines

Christianity | Science and Technology Studies

### Comments

Paper presented at the Christian Engineering Conference held at the University of Northwestern-St. Paul, Minnesota, June 29-July 1, 2022.

# How Then Shall We Work: Should Christian Engineers Pursue Productivity?

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## Abstract

Technology critics like Neal Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*) and Nicholas Carr (*The Shallows*) have long held forth that our technology shapes us. In recent years, philosophers (including some that have presented at past Christian Engineering Conferences) have explored the value-ladenness of engineering design and how the biases in our technology affect us on a daily basis. A “hidden in plain sight” technology that we interact with everyday is our approach to getting things done, or our “productivity system.” While everyone has a productivity system, that is, a way of organizing, prioritizing, and executing tasks, some have thought more explicitly about their system than others. Author Cal Newport has popularized a time management system consisting of phases for Capture, Configure, and Control, as well as planning at different timescales. This productivity approach provides knowledge workers with the tools to get more things done in less time. The engineering design norms have provided a useful framework for considering the non-neutrality of technology. We apply them to evaluate the Capture, Configure, Control productivity system and consider whether Christians should buy into the notion of productivity in general and this system in particular.

## Introduction

Everyone does work. Most Christians today probably agree that work has value and meaning, and indeed the church has a long history of careful Christian thinkers (including Dorothy Sayers, Martin Luther, and John Calvin) who recognized the goodness of the biblical principles of vocation and calling. However in our present moment, as engineers or engineering faculty members, most of us know all too well how work can quickly become all-encompassing and feel like it gets in the way of the other good callings the Lord places on our lives. One of the keys to integrating our work with all the other good callings is for the work to feel manageable. The goal of this paper is to use the “engineering design norms” [1], [2], a framework for looking at technologies through a holistic Biblical lens, to examine how a particular time-management technology illuminates what drives us and shapes our work.

## Is being overwhelmingly busy part of God’s plan?

Before we dive into systems for managing time, it seems valuable to briefly consider whether or not we should be concerned about being productive or being too busy. Some Christian thinkers have come out strongly against being over-busy. For example, Corrie ten Boom, famous protector of the Jews during World War II and concentration camp survivor, wrote, “Don’t be a victim of activity. When Satan cannot make you bad, he makes you busy” [3]. The Bible (Proverbs in particular) also clearly admonishes against laziness.

Busy does not seem to be a Biblical pattern for doing the work of the kingdom of God. In fact, the few Biblical characters (like Martha and Moses) who might have answered “how’s it going?” with “I’m so busy” are redirected by the end of their busy episode (Luke 10, Exodus 18). Christ’s earthly ministry certainly was productive, with a lifetime full of teaching packed into three short years recorded in the gospels. The Gospel of Mark in particular notes the urgency of this period with its repetition of the word “immediately” 30 times in the relatively short book. However, Mark also clearly shows that Christ was

intentional about when and how he worked, specifically highlighting how his activity was punctuated with periods of rest and solitude, even when the disciples clearly thought he should be working (e.g. Mark 1:35-36). God does not promise us (or call us to) a life of inactivity, boredom, or carefree pursuit of our current whim. But he also does not call us to live a frenetic, overwhelmed life where we are always doing, doing, doing, without any intentional thought related to how we manage our time and how we faithfully serve most effectively. Consistently finding the balance between these extremes requires thinking carefully about when and how we do our work.

### **A Technology: Capture, Configure, Control**

While some people have thought more about their systems for doing work than others, we all have ways of organizing, prioritizing, and executing tasks. People who have thought explicitly about their system tend to call it a productivity system, e.g., a Franklin-Covey planner, a set of David Allen-inspired GTD (Getting Things Done) lists, or Cal Newport's "Capture, Configure, Control." The term "productivity" sometimes gets a bad reputation, as it conjures images of factory workers producing more widgets. However, the Oxford English Dictionary defines productivity as "the state or quality of producing something, especially crops; the effectiveness of productive effort, especially in industry, as measured in terms of the rate of output per unit of input" [4]. In short, productivity refers to the effectiveness of our effort in producing (i.e. doing work).

Our predilection for thinking of technology as the latest electronic gadgets predisposes us to overlook older technological artifacts, like the printed word, in our discussion of technology. However, technology can be defined as "the branch of knowledge that deals with the creation and use of technical means and their interrelation with life, society, and the environment, drawing upon such subjects as industrial arts, engineering, applied science, and pure science" or alternatively, "the application of this knowledge for practical ends" [5]. To elaborate, a robust understanding of technology recognizes that it is more a verb than a noun, that we do technology whenever we use God's creation to unfold its potential. When we purposely think about technology in light of this definition, we recognize that the systems by which we organize our work (productivity systems) are also a form of technology, and therefore can be viewed through the lens of technology critique. Much has been written about how technologies have values embedded in their designs and several of these authors have proposed sets of criteria to evaluate the values and identify potential biases in a design [1], [6]–[10].

There are many productivity technologies available—a search for "popular productivity systems" only scratches the surface as it returns articles with titles like "Best 15 Productivity Systems to Try in 2022" and "The Best Productivity Systems Used by Successful Workers." Most of the more effective systems popular with engineers and technologists at the moment typically share some common features: knowing what you need to get done and being intentional about when and how you do the work. The basic idea is that you capture all of your obligations and then create time plans to execute them, preferably in focused blocks of time ("time-blocking") [11]. Beyond this common framework, there are different ways to prioritize the work you do. Having played around with more than a few of these, one particular framing that the authors currently find helpful is Cal Newport's "Capture, Configure, Control" (CCC) system [12]. Newport proposes the following implementation of a productivity system:

- **Capture**  
At the most basic level, Capture is about gathering and then seeing everything you need to do. Instead of thinking about or remembering a task, you write down or type up all the work that you are responsible to do. The core of this approach comes from David Allen's seminal work *Getting Things Done*. He recommends getting everything out of your head; do not waste mental energy or anxiety trying to remember what you need to do. Throughout the day, record all the tasks that you are responsible for as soon as it comes to mind. Then, at the end of each day, move all of those captured items into a single system that you can trust that you will return to.

- **Configure**  
The Configure aspect seeks to organize what you have captured. Ultimately, you want to be able to quickly get an overview of what is on your plate including knowing what items are due soon or not and who you're waiting to hear back from. To do this, especially in this digital age, you must NOT work out of your inbox, either physical or email. Instead, the configuring should take place in a system that allows you to organize by both roles and categories. By grouping captured tasks in this way, you can see collections of needs arising for a given role. For example, considering the tasks for a professor, Kanban categories can be used to quickly identify tasks that should be completed today or what tasks are paused while waiting to hear back from someone. Furthermore, the tasks within a category can be arranged by priority. This organization provides a much clearer picture of what the status is for various tasks than what a list of tasks presents. In addition, a good Configure tool should allow you to have all the relevant information in one spot so that you don't have to go searching for it. If there is a document or website to review or an email to reply to, the tool should allow supporting items to be connected or linked to it.
- **Control**  
The Control phase seeks to use time as effectively as possible. This approach is in contrast to the reactive approach where you just do whatever task shows up next. Even if you only implement the two aforementioned phases, you are already more strategic than just working from a single list of tasks, because now you can focus on the tasks in a single category for one of your roles. However, for full implementation of the Control phase, you will be also be proactive related to *when* you do the work. "Make a plan for your time in advance that makes the most of the time you actually have available" [12].

This planning is practically implemented via what Newport calls Multi-scale Planning: planning at the Quarterly, Weekly, and Daily levels. At the Quarterly level (or Semester for academics), you make a plan that includes upcoming projects and deadlines as well as a list of the key activities and results that you want to pursue. At the Weekly planning level, you review the Quarterly plan to assess what you need to do in the upcoming week in order to make necessary progress toward those goals. In addition, you review the scheduled items on your calendar and determine what discretionary time you have available. Finally, you look over your Configured tasks to see what you should move forward on. With all of this gathered information, you piece together your week with the tasks you plan to complete each day. Thus, when you get to Daily planning, you take the tasks from your Weekly plan, as well as any others that cropped up during the week, and create a clear plan for each hour of the day. (Newport recommends that these time-blocks be in increments of 30 min or longer. Tasks taking less than 30 min can be grouped together in a block and listed out separately.)

One argument against daily planning is that plans can change during the day, so why should we spend time on a plan? Newport would respond by asking, "Don't you want to spend your time in the best way possible?" He strongly recommends that you start your day with a plan so you spend your limited time as effectively as possible, with the understanding that when interruptions happen or your schedule blows up, the plan is not immutable. That said, he recommends returning to your plan as soon as possible, and then updating your plan for the remaining hours.

Newport also points out that you can aim this Control at more than just work. During a given week, you can time-block the pursuit of creative endeavors, reading, or picking up your kids during working hours with confidence. Because you know what is on your plate, you know things are not being forgotten and when things will get done. Therefore, you can reduce the amount of time spent on getting your normal workload done and pursue (potentially) more interesting, creative, and less stressful work...if that is what you *choose* to do. Additionally, deploying a CCC approach facilitates a regular practice of sabbath,

because you know that all obligations are captured and when you plan to do them you can confidently take time to rest without stressing about missed obligations.

### **A Reflection on the CCC system using the Engineering Design Norms**

Newport's "Capture, Configure, Control" system seems helpful and practical, but technologies often shape the user as much (or more) than the user shapes the technology. Thus, it is important to think carefully about the underlying presuppositions in this system and seek to discern the values and priorities encouraged by embracing such a system. One helpful biblical framework that has been utilized regularly in Christian Engineering Conference works over the years is the engineering design norms, which are a Biblically-based set of criteria derived from philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd's upper modal aspects [1]. These normative principles were fleshed out by considering the wholeness of the Scriptural revelation, discerning the overarching principles that come from our understanding of God's overall Creation-Fall-Redemption story, and thinking specifically about how these principles inform and direct how we do and use technology. The design norms are cultural appropriateness, openness and communication, stewardship, delightful harmony, justice, caring, and trust. The authors believe that using these design norms to critique a system (either positively or negatively or both) is a helpful way for the thoughtful Christian to examine the faithfulness, responsibility, and intentionality of their approach. In this case, this process will help us think through how Newport's CCC approach helps and/or hinders the Christian engineer in their daily walk with the Lord.

*Cultural appropriateness.* This norm says that any technology should be appropriate to the culture in which it is being implemented. Thoughtful management of time and schedule is something that should be expected of any professional in the "knowledge sector." However, some aspects of the system are counter cultural and might need to be handled delicately. For example, on a personal scale, CCC explicitly rejects what Newport calls "the hyperactive hive mind" by moving work (and work time) away from the email inbox. This shift may result in slower email response times (hours or days instead of minutes), which some may view as laziness or inattentiveness. On a larger scale, Newport's system is trying to facilitate change away from unhealthy work behaviors that have crept up on knowledge work with the ubiquity of the internet and messaging, and some of these may be culturally disruptive. Large steps away from "typical" cultural behaviors will require clear expectation setting with co-workers and collaborators and a particular focus on the next design norm.

*Openness and communication.* Technology should be transparent about its uses and engineers should communicate clearly and openly about the technology. In the case of a CCC system, the case can be made that the whole purpose of the system is to be open and communicate well **with yourself** in what your own demands and expectations are. However, a potential pitfall of the system relates to communication as well, since some aspects of the system (e.g. the email practices described previously) may be initially perceived by others as less timely and efficient communication. Much of this can be avoided by including intentional communication and expectation setting with colleagues—if they know (and trust) that you will respond to emails or work on their project at 3pm on Thursdays, they will almost certainly be willing to set aside an expectation that you respond to their email within one hour. Newport's system does not guarantee good open communication, but if carefully and thoughtfully implemented, it does offer the possibility of improvement in communication with both ourselves and others. If we are managing our time better, we will likely be communicating better with others. This norm highlights a need to continually focus outwardly, rather than inwardly, as we implement CCC so that we avoid the trap of becoming obsessed with our own time and schedule rather than making sure that we are continuing to live primarily to God's glory and to show love to our neighbor.

*Stewardship.* The norm of stewardship reflects the needs of a design to use resources wisely. Newport's system seems to excel in stewardship. As Christians, we are called to be stewardly with the resources that God has entrusted to our care, and when we are working in the knowledge sector, time is certainly one of these resources. The Holy Spirit clearly teaches in God's Word the value of working well, while also

warning against laziness (e.g. Proverbs 6:6, 10:26, 13:4, 15:19, 19:24, 20:4, 21:25, 22:13, 24:30, 26:13-16). These Scriptural admonitions are probably rarely considered as calls to stewardship, but given that time is a resource, it is relatively straight-forward to see them as encouraging stewardship of time. Thinking carefully about the way we use our time is being obedient to God's call to be stewards of what he has entrusted to us.

*Delightful harmony.* Something that is delightfully harmonious “must be effective in the sense that it does well what it purports to do, it is pleasing and satisfying to use, and it promotes harmonious relationships between humankind and God, between differing cultures and societies, among people within the same culture or society, and between humans and the natural creation” [1]. The CCC system in general facilitates this by being a straight-forward and simple to use method for knowing all obligations and when you might be able to accomplish them, all of which reduces feelings of stress, business, and overwhelm. Not only does this potentially provide peace of mind about one's job, it also promotes harmonious relationships. When implemented well, using a CCC system could lead to additional temporal and mental energy for developing our relationships with God and people, allowing us to serve them better by being fully present and more intentional in fulfilling our responsibilities toward them. Note that focus and motivation is important here, however, because if we seek to incorporate Newport's system primarily with too much of an inward focus (i.e. on me instead of my community), it could do just the opposite. In this implementation scenario, the system could provide an excuse for not interacting well with others because that interaction requires time outside the “system” and therefore we simply do not do it. The norm of delightful harmony highlights that a Christian implementing Newport's system must maintain an outward focus if they are to glorify God and love our neighbor in all they do.

*Justice.* The norm of justice emphasizes the responsibility of designers to see “that their work promotes justice, that each person receives his or her due as an image bearer of God, and that the rest of creation receives proper respect” [1]. In this context, it seems that again the CCC system promotes the norm of justice, as each task is given its due focus in a time-block plan, and well captured and configured work will show respect to others, as they are focused on as important in their moment. Assuming that a CCC system is implemented with an awareness of the needs of others, it can help us treat those with whom we interact more appropriately as God's image bearers.

*Caring.* The norm of caring promotes “interactions among those involved in a design...of a caring nature—a genuine concern and love must be shown to those making design decisions” [1]. This norm highlights the heart of the concerns noted previously about implementing the CCC system in an outward facing, rather than an inward facing manner. For the system to be implemented Christianly, it must be done in a way that keeps caring for others at the forefront of the purpose for implementing the system. Responsibly capturing, configuring, and controlling our schedule, when done with an outward focus on how we can better serve those around us, will help us to be more caring in those relationships God has entrusted to us. But a selfish implementation could lead to exactly the opposite. This norm perhaps emphasizes most significantly the role that user choice plays in the implementation and execution of such a system.

*Trust.* This norm emphasizes the importance of reliability and trustworthiness in a design or technology. A well-implemented CCC system should improve the trust that others have in our reliability. Being more responsible and efficient in how we use our time will probably mean that others perceive us as reliable and dependable, those who can be counted on to do what we say and say what we do. There is also a dimension of trust in that the user should implement a system that they can trust. (In fact, Newport sometimes calls CCC “a simple trusted system.”) It is worth noting that the clarity that this system provides may lead to trust issues if people we work with feel like we are not allocating enough time for them or their interests. This might lead to a situation where the norm of open communication would be extremely important in resolving differences of opinion in order to build and maintain trust. It will be important in implementing such a system to reflect on everyone with whom we are interacting and make sure we are appropriately engaging them and enhancing their trust rather than the opposite.

Overall, Newport’s system does not seem to be something that thoughtful Christians need to shy away from; it has the potential to help us interact more faithfully and responsibly in the calls God has placed before us and the relationships he has entrusted to us. But we need to be sure to have our posture and heart direction outwardly focused toward God and others in our implementation of such a system, or it can quickly become an excuse to focus on ourselves rather than others and stray from our lifelong call to glorify God and love neighbor in all that we do.

### **Normative Implementation of Capture Configure Control: An Example**

Practically speaking, implementation of the Capture, Configure, Control system can take many different forms and be adapted broadly across knowledge-work professions (if Newport’s wide readership and podcast audience are any indicator). Each person can figure out a system that works for their own situation and priorities, but generally speaking a CCC implementation for Christian engineering faculty members might include the following reflection prompts and actions:

- **Capture**  
Where do tasks/thoughts/ideas regularly (or occasionally) come up that need to be captured? How might you capture consistently? Do you have a blank page at the front of a course binder to capture things before/during/after class (e.g., changes to make for next year, something to look up, a task completely unrelated to the class, etc.)? Do you ask students to email you their “could you check on this?” requests so that you can process them later? Do you shift to an electronic document when you are at a computer? Do you use your phone as part of the system or do you carry a paper notebook everywhere you go? There are many possibilities, but the key is to have a low-friction way to capture at all times. It is also important to remember that this piece of technology should encourage, embody, and facilitate the design norms—easy to communicate with, pleasant to use, and promoting care and justice through culturally appropriate and reliable note capture.
- **Configure**  
How will you review and organize all the things you’ve captured? Do you review all of your capture devices at the end of the day or when you return to your office from teaching or meetings? As you review your captured items, where do you store the tasks, obligations, and information you’ve collected until it is time to work on them—in a paper notebook, text file, or Evernote notebook related to the role or category? Or do you use a digital list via a software tool that allows links, like Workflowy? Or via a Trello board (the authors’ favorite) with virtual cards on which you can attach files, links, progress history, and more? Whatever you choose, regular implementation of this step is essential if your brain is going to trust the system.
- **Control**  
When will you execute the work you have organized in your configure system? Will you plan at monthly, weekly, and daily timescales? Where will you keep track of the plan you make? An electronic calendar like Gcal or Outlook? A paper calendar or notebook? A text file or Gdoc? Will you schedule time-blocks for specific tasks or for particular topics? How will you revise/update the plan when it changes? There is no one way (though many people find a digital weekly plan and a paper daily plan work well) so experiment and find what works best for you; the key thing is that you are making a plan for your time, then using that plan and your configuration system to execute the tasks that you have captured.

While these prompts and questions are primarily focused on the tasks of faculty members, the principles and practices apply equally well to engineers in industry (or indeed to anyone doing creative knowledge work). For example, an engineer in industry might need to capture tasks and insights from a variety of meetings while away from their desk (instead of questions from students after class), and the same



questions about tools, technology and strategies would be applicable. The most important thing that anyone (engineer or not) should consider is whether or not their implementation of the CCC system is normative - is it reflecting a love of God and others or a love of self?

### **Thoughts on Biblical Productivity**

While CCC and similar systems clearly have benefits, it can be easy to slip into the trap of thinking that finding the right system will prevent feelings of overwhelm. It is essential to recognize that God's grace is messy and really (in a sense) "unproductive." This non-linear approach means that sometimes God's divine appointments will interfere with our plans. "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps" (Proverbs 16:9). A healthy approach to productivity must not only recognize this reality but find a way to embrace it. As much as engineering-inclined humans may want everyone to operate on predictable schedules in predictable manners all the time (rather like robots?) that is not the world God created, nor is it the nature of the salvation story through which he shows us his grace. God did not create us to "get things done." Rather, He created us with the chief aim of glorifying him and enjoying him [13].

The design norm of "[t]rust also means that those who design technological objects must ultimately do so out of a faith commitment to God, the Creator of all, not out of a faith commitment to technicism or any other false God" [1]. The inefficient and relational nature of grace is particularly important as we think about the work relationships God is asking us to cultivate in order to (hopefully!) bring honor and glory to his name. While this applies to all engineers (and truly all workers), it is perhaps especially important for Christian faculty members, where a significant job-role is relational mentorship with our students (be they undergraduate or graduate). Unfortunately for our schedules this mentorship does not always occur on our time plan, and being sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading in these moments is essential.

### **Conclusion**

The Capture Configure Control system itself (and perhaps all productivity systems?) reflects favorably in the light of the engineering design norms, but how individuals choose to implement them reflects their hearts. If the implementation of Newport's system is motivated by our faithful gaze toward our Lord and Savior in gratitude for what he has done for us, the authors of this paper say, "Amen!" But if its implementation is motivated by a self-serving posture and desire, then we admonish the "user" to reflect on their heart's desire and pray that their motivation can be refocused and redirected. This posture and heart attitude seems to be the key to whether Newport's system is implemented faithfully and obediently or not. An outward-focused posture will help to ensure avoiding the negative pitfalls that have been mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, whereas an inward-focused posture will do quite the opposite.

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