

## CONFERENCE

### Session Report

# Attention!: How to Harness It for Productivity and Deep Work

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#### By Allie Boman

Dr Kilibarda started out by declaring that, although she and Dr Winter-Vann created it themselves, she was unhappy with the title of her presentation. The word harness, she said, implies that attention is outside of yourself and you need to catch it. Rather, like happiness, attention is already within you. Thus, a better title would be “How to Cultivate Attention for Productivity and Deep Work.”

Dr Kilibarda, and later Dr Winter-Vann, presented a curated set of attention theories and practices, rich with lived experience and tangible ideas for implementation.

First, Dr Kilibarda challenged the idea that work and play exist on opposite sides of the spectrum of unenjoyment to enjoyment. She decried this idea as a false binary and encouraged a more holistic view of work as expression and productivity.

We can increase the enjoyment and fulfillment of our work by cultivating our attention. In doing so, we create contexts in which we access and produce the best we have to give.

Without some intentionality, however, we may remain in shallow work—tasks that require little cognitive power but take time—for most of the day or week. Shallow work is often visible to others and holds some value, but it can easily be replicated by others.

In contrast, deep work provides a context for enjoyable, fruitful productivity. Summarizing Cal Newport and others, Dr Kilibarda described deep work as a distraction-free state requiring cognitive power, concentration, and endurance. By training ourselves to regularly enter into deep work, we access and produce that which we alone can contribute. We create space for offering our true value.

Dr Kilibarda explained that the sweet spot for deep work is 90 minutes without interruption. It takes training and practice to be able to concentrate for this long, but learning to do so is key to contributing our best work. She stated that the average worker wants about 8–10 hours of uninterrupted deep work per week. However, managers and teams tend to undervalue long periods without interruption because it appears as though little is being accomplished. Therefore, maintaining this practice at work requires self-advocacy.

Dr Winter-Vann built on the theory of deep work, covering how to cultivate attention practically.

#### HOW TO CULTIVATE DEEP WORK

- **Prioritize** tasks using Eisenhower’s urgent/important matrix
- **Plan** time blocks, building space in your schedule for deep work
- **Communicate** when you are entering a deep work block, so people won’t expect an instant response from you
- **Enforce boundaries**—don’t agree to meetings during your planned deep work times
- **Shut off notifications** (use “do not disturb” on your devices, etc.)
- **Create a routine** around deep work sessions (signal to your brain that it’s time to do deep work; similar to bedtime rituals for children)
- **Rest** between sessions of deep work
- **Audit your time**—how does what you did compare with what you planned to do?

#### HOW TO MINIMIZE SHALLOW WORK

- **Automate/delegate** low-importance tasks
- **Set reminders** to release yourself from needing to remember details (e.g., set an alarm for when it’s time to leave work to pick up your kid from school)
- **Compress** the time allotted to answering emails, etc. (e.g., plan a 30-minute session for responding to messages)

- **Normalize** unavailability—counter the expectation that you will respond to messages immediately

Dr Kilibarda emphasized the value of getting into a flow state via deep work. The idea is to be so immersed in your work that time disappears. Some tedium is required for reaching this state, partially because we are used to dopamine fixes: when we rely on instant rewards through easy tasks and distractions, we are feeding our brain dysfunction. So part of mastery in deep work is getting used to boredom, which Angela Duckworth says is very tiring! This is why rest after a session of deep work is crucial, even if it doesn't look like we've accomplished much.

Finally, Dr Winter-Vann reiterated the difference between shallow and deep work: Shallow work doesn't take much skill. It might require a few weeks to train someone to do it. (In fact, you might consider training someone to take over some of your shallow work!) Deep work, however, accesses the skills and knowledge that you have developed over months and years. It is in this context that you bring forth your unique value on the job and in your world.

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## AMWA2022

*Julia Forjanic Klapproth, PhD (left) receives the 2022 Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award from Sarah Dobney, MPH.*



*Brian Bass, MWC is our 2022 Golden Apple award winner!*



*Kelly Byram, MS, MBA, ELS (left) receives the 2022 AMWA President's Award from Katrina R. Burton, BS.*