

The Work That Time Does

Ripening, readiness and what we should refuse to accelerate

THIS WEEK'S THOUGHT

Efficiency asks how quickly something can be completed. Wisdom asks what needs time in order to become good.

THIS WEEK'S BIG IDEA: THE WORK THAT TIME DOES

This week's theme is ripening.

We live in a culture increasingly organised around acceleration. Faster answers, faster analysis, faster content, faster learning, faster decisions. AI intensifies this because it can compress activities that once took hours into minutes.

The deeper question is: what happens when we accelerate processes whose value partly comes from the time they take?

There are obvious candidates: judgement, trust, expertise, recovery, creativity, relationships, identity and wisdom.

Learning research gives us a useful clue. A recent paper on generative AI and cognitive offloading argues that AI can operate as a tool, tutor or crutch, depending on whether it supports meaningful cognitive engagement or replaces it. Research on creative incubation similarly finds that stepping away from a problem can improve subsequent problem-solving, particularly for divergent-thinking tasks.

Some apparent inefficiency is therefore doing developmental work.

- A difficult conversation may need a night's sleep.
- An idea may need several walks.
- A skill requires retrieval after some forgetting.
- A leader develops judgement by experiencing consequences over time.
- A relationship acquires trust through repeated evidence.

The interesting distinction is between processing time and maturation time. Technology is exceptionally good at reducing processing time. It cannot necessarily eliminate maturation time without changing what

is being produced.

AN IDEA TO DEVELOP: THE FOUR SPEEDS OF GOOD WORK

Instead of categorising work simply as human or automated, divide it into four different temporal categories.

SPEED	WHAT BELONGS HERE	EXAMPLES
Accelerate	Activities where speed creates value and little human development is lost.	Formatting, routine administration, information retrieval, transcription, first-pass comparison
Practise	Activities that may be assisted by technology but still require humans to exercise the capability themselves.	Writing, numerical reasoning, critical analysis, communication, negotiation, professional judgement
Incubate	Activities where a pause between engagement and resolution may improve the outcome.	Creative work, strategic thinking, complex decisions, difficult conversations, problem-solving
Ripen	Things that develop through repeated experience over extended time.	Expertise, reputation, identity, relationships, leadership judgement, trust, purpose

Which parts of this process should become faster, and which parts must retain enough time for human capability to develop?

That distinction has growing relevance. An August 2026 viewpoint on cognitive offloading argues that the educational value of AI depends partly on whether it supports or substitutes for reflection, reasoning and problem-solving. A separate August study found that adaptive GenAI features can also reduce cognitive load and support resilience and personalised learning.

The lesson is nuanced. The issue is not speed itself. It is knowing what kind of process we are speeding up.

A useful team exercise follows. Map your own work across the four categories, then identify where acceleration has accidentally removed learning, reflection or relationship.

CURATED FOR THE WEEK: THE SHELF

BOOK

Slow Productivity, Cal Newport

Newport’s three principles are to do fewer things, work at a natural pace and focus deeply on quality, with an explicit exploration of seasonal variation in work. The question to take from it: could natural pace become an organisational design principle rather than a personal coping strategy?

READ, LISTEN OR WATCH

BOOK

Four Thousand Weeks, Oliver Burkeman

Burkeman's central argument begins with finitude. Human beings cannot optimise their way into having enough time for everything, so a meaningful life requires choosing what deserves our limited attention. This connects beautifully with AI. If AI saves us time, the important question becomes: what are we saving the time for?

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

BOOK

Rest, Alex Soojung-Kim Pang

Pang treats work and rest as complementary processes and explores deliberate rest as part of creative and intellectual performance. It challenges the assumption that recovery begins only after productive work finishes. Perhaps recovery is part of productive work.

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

RESEARCH

Learning with AI or learning from AI?

Published 31 August 2026, Anupreet Kaur Mokha examines cognitive offloading and proposes the Tool-Tutor-Crutch framework. AI can support accessibility and personalised learning while excessive reliance can reduce critical reflection and independent reasoning. An important reference for maintaining the Human Reserve.

RESEARCH

Beyond Burnout

This August 2026 study asks a much more useful question than simply how leaders avoid burnout: what enables leadership wellbeing and effectiveness to be sustained over time? Mission focus, relationship mastery and intentional wellbeing practices were important differentiators among the nonprofit leaders studied, and the longitudinal analysis linked leadership wellbeing with effectiveness. Sustainability is a performance condition, not an aftercare programme.

RESEARCH

Conversation, creativity and innovation

A paper published online on 3 September examined organisational communication patterns in a nationally representative sample of 378 workers. Conversation-oriented communication was positively associated with creativity and innovation. If organisations become more efficient at producing individual output but create fewer spaces for genuine conversation, they could inadvertently weaken one of the environments in which ideas develop.

PODCAST

Rethinking Work

The 2 September episode, *Doing More With Less*, explores how a small team can deliberately remain small while reaching millions of readers. The broader series examines work, AI, purpose, creativity and organisational design. Listen with one question in mind: when does scale improve something, and when does scale change the thing itself?

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

VIDEO

A World Without Work, Daniel Susskind

Susskind's 2026 Gresham lecture examines structural technological unemployment and the possibility that AI may eventually reduce the quantity of economically necessary human work. The question lies beyond employment: if less human labour becomes economically necessary, how do we create lives rich in contribution, belonging, mastery and meaning?

[READ, LISTEN OR WATCH](#)

NATURE CONNECTION: SEPTEMBER TEACHES READINESS

September is a particularly interesting month for thinking about time. It is simultaneously harvest and preparation.

The RHS September calendar includes harvesting apples, pears, plums and autumn raspberries while also sowing vegetables for overwintering and planting crops that will produce months later. Gardeners are encouraged to sow green manure on bare ground to capture nutrients and protect soil during winter.

[EXPLORE THE RHS SEPTEMBER CALENDAR](#)

That last practice is a wonderful metaphor. Green manure produces no immediate crop. Its value lies in what it preserves and prepares.

Human lives contain equivalents. Reading without a project attached. Walking. Gardening. Learning something with no immediate commercial application. Maintaining friendships. Playing music. Sitting beside water. Thinking without producing.

These can look unproductive when judged by immediate output. They may actually be cover crops for human capability, protecting psychological soil from erosion and replenishing resources needed for future growth.

The apple test

September fruit offers another metaphor. The RHS advises testing apples for readiness by cupping the fruit and gently twisting upwards. If ripe, it comes away easily.

There is an elegant leadership principle hidden in that. Readiness has signals. Pulling harder does not make an unripe apple ready. Nor does applying greater pressure necessarily make a person ready for leadership, an organisation ready for transformation, an idea ready for publication or a decision ready to be made.

Hedgerows are now producing elderberries, haws, rosehips and, increasingly, sloes as autumn develops. Nature is full of processes where timing matters as much as effort. Perhaps human development is too.

[EXPLORE THE SEPTEMBER HEDGEROW WITH THE WOODLAND TRUST](#)

THE EMERGING RADAR: IDEAS WORTH WATCHING

AI literacy may need to include knowing when not to use AI

Much AI capability training currently focuses on prompting and tool use. The emerging cognitive-offloading literature suggests a more sophisticated competency: knowing which cognitive work a person should continue performing themselves. AI literacy may eventually include deliberate non-use, independent reasoning and the ability to recognise when assistance is weakening capability.

Sustainable leadership is moving from resilience to regeneration

The Beyond Burnout research looks beyond surviving pressure towards sustaining effectiveness and wellbeing over time. Resilience asks: can I withstand this? Regeneration asks: does the way I am living restore enough capacity for me to continue growing?

Creativity may be socially cultivated

The recent organisational communication research reminds us that creativity is partly an environmental property. Communication climates influence whether ideas are explored, challenged and developed. That matters as AI makes solitary production extraordinarily easy. We may discover that conversation becomes more valuable precisely because individual production becomes cheaper.

Meaningful work may increasingly require job crafting

2026 research involving 451 workers across four European countries found that job crafting was associated with autonomy, competence and relatedness, with meaningful work playing an important role in engagement. As AI changes job content, organisations may need to give people greater opportunity to reshape roles rather than continually redesigning work for them.

The scarce resource may become maturation rather than information

Information is becoming abundant. Analysis is becoming cheaper. Drafting is becoming instantaneous. What remains stubbornly slow? Trust. Experience. Judgement. Cultural change. Mastery. Healing. Identity. Meaning. As technology accelerates production, organisations may increasingly compete on their ability to protect slow human processes.

THINK AND CREATE: A PROMPT FOR YOUR OWN WRITING

Begin with an apple tree in September. Some fruit is ready. Some looks ready but holds tightly to the branch. Some has already fallen.

Write: what in my life has become ready because I worked on it, and what has become ready because time worked on it?

Then explore a decision, relationship, capability or idea you once tried to accelerate. What would have happened if you had allowed more time? What happened because you did not?

Move from your experience into modern work. Ask: what are organisations currently pulling from the branch before they are ripe? People? Leaders? Ideas? Skills? AI implementations?

Finish with: Perhaps patience is not passive waiting. Perhaps it is the ability to recognise what time is still doing.

PAUSE AND NOTICE: REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Where am I currently trying to force ripeness?

Then ask: is this something that needs more effort? More courage? More information? Or simply more time?

Those are very different prescriptions.

YOUR PRACTICAL EXPERIMENT: THE RIPENING WINDOW

Choose one meaningful piece of work this week that does not genuinely require immediate completion. It might be an article, strategic decision, proposal, difficult email or creative idea.

Work on it seriously. Then stop before completing it. Give it at least one natural transition: a night's sleep, a walk, gardening, swimming, cooking or another activity requiring a different kind of attention. During that period, do not keep consciously working on it.

When you return, spend ten minutes reviewing it before using AI. Notice:

- what has changed in your thinking
- what now looks unnecessary
- whether a new connection appeared
- whether your judgement feels different
- what AI subsequently contributes after your own thinking has matured

You are testing a simple proposition: does elapsed time sometimes improve the quality of thought? Research on incubation suggests that it can.

METAPHOR BANK: LINES WORTH KEEPING

Green manure for the mind. Some activities create little visible output while protecting the conditions from which future work will grow.

The apple test. When fruit is ripe, it releases. Pulling harder is not the same as creating readiness.

Processing time versus maturation time. Technology can compress the first. Human systems still require the second.

The Four Speeds of Good Work. Accelerate. Practise. Incubate. Ripen.

- We have become extraordinarily good at shortening the time between question and answer. We may now need to protect the time between experience and understanding.
- Not every delay is waste. Sometimes the delay is where the development happens.
- The question for an AI-enabled life is not simply what we can do faster. It is what deserves to remain slow.
- A garden at harvest time contains evidence of work done months ago and preparation for crops that do not yet exist. That may be a better model of a human life than the daily to-do list.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Some days are for harvesting. Some are for planting. Some are for protecting the soil. A sustainable life needs all three.

WORK SMART IS THE MEANS. LIVING WELL IS THE POINT.

Vanessa Aradia

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