

EMAIL MANAGEMENT

How to Reduce Email Overload



HOW TO ORGANIZE YOUR EMAIL INBOX

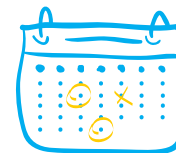
Do you feel that you can spend your whole day responding to incoming messages? Having a hard time finding an email in your inbox? How do you regain control over your email and reduce its effects on your productivity?

Managing email at work is an important goal because so many people forget about important action items when they get buried under other messages and workplace interruptions. Reducing email by sorting through and categorizing messages for follow-up will help you stop the cycle of email overload.

To keep email under control, develop a system that will help speed-up your response time and keep up with pending projects and action items. Decide what gets categorized and what gets trashed. Developing a new approach to processing your Inbox can help you gain more control, improve your response time, and keep up with critical actions and due dates. We've outlined some best practices that can help you stop wasting time and reduce your dependence on email.



Email handled well reduces meetings. And meetings handled well reduced email.
(Source – David Gallo, Getting Things Done)



Developing a new approach to processing your Inbox can help you gain more control, improve your response time, and keep up with critical actions and due dates. (Source – Microsoft at work)

15 WAYS TO STOP EMAIL OVERLOAD



1. IS EMAIL THE RIGHT COMMUNICATION PATH

Email should not become the catch-all for work communications. According to Gartner analyst Craig Roth, “Email is just one part of the overall information workplace that consists of many communication and collaboration mechanisms (technical and non-technical).” Different conversational needs exist and if email is not the right way to answer the message, treat the message need as valid and describe what other channels should be used instead. Segment your personal communications by interactions that are right for email versus phone or in-person meetings.

While emails can be necessary for multi-locational teams and for formal communications, this mode of communication can also hamper the real work itself. Reviewing documents can be handled using collaboration tools like SharePoint, Google Docs or similar software other than email. Increase the use of instant messaging for quick responses as these initiatives will help reduce email traffic and clutter.

2. UNSUBSCRIBE TO E-NEWSLETTERS AND TURN OFF SOCIAL MEDIA NOTIFICATIONS

Reduce the amount of incoming e-mail by unsubscribing to e-newsletters or turning off notifications from Facebook or Twitter. If you don’t have time to read e-newsletters and alerts cancel them.

3. ELIMINATE SPAM

Use a reliable Internet service provider to block spam on the server side. Keep your clickable email address off the web. According to Peggy Duncan, a personal productivity expert and author of the *Conquer Email Overload with Better Habits, Etiquette, and Outlook 2007*, there is no valid reason for putting your live, clickable e-mail address on the web. Spambots scour the Internet looking for the “@” symbol. Instead, spell out “at” when you post your contact information. Google all of your email addresses to see where they show up and remove them. Sign up for Google Alerts so you will be notified if they show up anywhere later.

Get a powerful spam blocker and turn up the security volume in your email software. Set your security at high.

4. DELETE, DELETE, DELETE

Decide which messages to keep and which to delete. When you sit down to deal with messages in your Inbox, make decisions right then on what to do with each one. Ask yourself: Do I really need to save this message? Can I access this information somewhere else? If the email has no value and you will never look at it again, delete it. If you are sure you never want to see the message again, permanently delete it. Don't let the message linger.

5. RESPOND APPROPRIATELY

Not all e-mail requires a response. If you receive an e-mail addressed to several people, take the time to read the email as you may not need to respond. If a response is required, it may not need to go to everybody.

If you cannot talk in person or over the phone, ensure to be succinct in your email and limit your messages to a few sentences. Clearly identify if any action needs to be taken and include any timelines (if applicable) that need to be met. Try to set up a call or talk in person after the initial e-mail correspondence to ensure that no information in the email was misconstrued - this will also eliminate more email.

6. TAKE THE TIME TO REPLY

If an e-mail contains several different points, respond to each point in separate messages or use a different colour font for each point. This may take longer at first but, it will be easier to deal with each e-mail thread.

If the e-mail requires a response to two or more people, utilize a different font colour for each name and response. Ensure that the colour of font matches with the name of the person you are responding as well as the message.

Do not send one-word emails and reply to everyone on the email thread. Remember, the more email you send, the more you receive. Take the time to reply – it can save you twice the time in the future.

7. USE DESCRIPTIVE SUBJECT LINES

Subject lines should relate to the body of the e-mail. Avoid using subject lines that say things like “question” or “hello” as recipients will not know what the message is about. It will also be difficult for you to categorize responses. Be as descriptive as possible! If you have a one-line e-mail, put it in the subject line at this will save you and the recipient time.

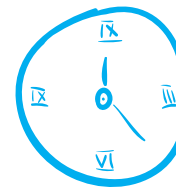
With colleagues, try using a set of acronyms or codes in the subject line. Codes will help you process and prioritize messages faster. For example, use “FYI” for informational messages, “AR” for action required and “URG” for urgent messages.

8. USE BULLETS AND BOLDFACE TYPE

Most people scan and skim content looking for the highlights in the email. Use bullets, boldface type and other design best practices to ensure readers stay engaged. Avoid sending paragraphs of text in which calls-to-action are buried. If the matter is of an urgent nature, try using bold or the underline feature to draw the recipient's attention to the specific deadline or task.

9. FORWARDING AND COPYING

Summarize the message and explain to the recipient why you are forwarding the email. This is helpful when an e-mail contains a thread of several messages and will reduce questions. Copy someone on a message only if it is necessary and clearly identify to the recipient why you are copying them. This will also reduce back and forth messages.



Use the 10 Second Rule. When someone opens your email they should be able to know within 10 seconds or less what your message is about.

(Source – Darrell Zahorsky, About.com)

10. FILE, FLAG AND SET REMINDERS

Avoid the temptation to check your e-mail every few minutes. Set time aside each morning and evening to process your inbox. File messages you need to keep and set reminders for messages that require you to follow-up. Flag and colour code your emails. Some flagging features allow you to type notes and reminders. Colour coding can signal whether the email is a top priority or where it's been delegated.

Folder structure is important to help you find the things you need quickly. "People create folders with no logic at all," says Peggy Duncan. Be specific when naming and organizing your files.

11. USE FILTERS, FOLDERS AND RULES

Filter and file your inbox. Email programs such as Outlook and Gmail can configure email rules to send spam directly to the trash – meaning you won't waste your time reading and deleting it. This process involves having incoming mail identified based on sender, keywords, subject, etc. and then categorized and filed appropriately. To help prevent email backlog in the future, Auto Archive sent items and choose to permanently delete them after a few weeks.

12. ENABLE YOUR OUT-OF-OFFICE AUTO-RESPONSE

Enable the out-of-office auto-response message to alert colleagues, customers and clients that you are out of the office or out of town. Ensure to identify in your out-of-office message if you have limited access to email and remember to provide an alternate contact name, phone number and e-mail address for those who may require immediate assistance



If an email doesn't require a response, don't respond – or you risk getting a reply back!

13. YOUR INBOX IS NOT YOUR TO-DO LIST

Do not use your Inbox to assess what task you should get to first. Accumulating messages as an electronic to-do list becomes overwhelming. As messages come to your Inbox, handle them immediately if it is a quick task or make a note to process it later. Get in the habit of dealing with each message as you read it, or after you have sent out. Utilize the tasks section of Outlook (if applicable) or delete or save emails for reference in another folder. Create a "To Do" folder and file your task emails there instead of your Inbox. Review your "To Do" folder at least once a day.

14. DELETE DUPLICATE EMAILS AND EARLIER PORTIONS OF EMAIL CHAINS

If you receive multiple copies of the same email message, save only one and delete the others. This often happens when someone forwards something to you that you have already received directly or from another forward.

If you have an ongoing or lengthy exchange of emails with someone wherein each message quotes the earlier messages and responses, delete all earlier messages and save the last one. Doing this may remove any duplicates of the same text and save space in your Inbox.

If you work collaboratively with someone or a group on a document and have been exchanging various drafts as the document is developed, each draft attachment will take up space. By completion you may have various earlier versions of the document and so will each group member working with you. Unless required, save the final document, and delete all earlier copies.

15. CLEAR OUT YOUR INBOX AND KEEP IT CLEAN

Leave only messages that still need your prompt attention in your Inbox. Start by emptying out your Inbox. If you have thousands of messages in your main folder, create a new folder called "Old Inbox" or "Archives" and store the messages in there. You will still have access to these emails if needed, but you will be able to handle incoming messages more easily and with less stress.

TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR EMAIL

STOP USING IT FOR STORAGE

Once you have significantly reduced your emails in your Inbox, commit to sorting through new email right away. Delete any messages you do not need to read or keep. If you can reply to a message in a few minutes or less do so. Establish a routine that works for you. Once you have a system in place, stick to it. For the rest of your emails, decide where they should go and file them. Put these emails into folders or use flags or labels to indicate the priority and when you need to respond by. Deal with each email as you open it.

Managing email overload by freeing up your inbox frees up a lot of mental space, allowing you more time to accomplish your daily tasks instead of constantly wasting time re-reading the same emails without deciding what you need to do with them. Make it a daily goal to get your number of emails down. Establish a regular time each day to process your email so that you can empty your Inbox. Process your emails, don't just check them. Choose a number of times during the day when you will review your inbox and decide what you are going to do with those emails right then and there. Try booking yourself a recurring appointment for an hour a day to process email, and mark that time as "busy." During that hour, work only on processing your Inbox. Turn off the audio alert that sounds each time you receive a new email, as it can also be a distraction.

Process your email, one item at a time starting from the top. Sort your email by the order in which you will process it. Filter your emails by date, subject or by the sender or the receiver of the email message. Resist the temptation to jump around in your Inbox in no particular order. Begin processing the message at the top of your Inbox and only move to the second one after you have read or handled the first.

Avoid sending one-word emails and replying to everyone on an email thread. Utilize the to-do bar to track emailed tasks and review all of your action steps daily. If there is no action for you to take and you do not think you will need the email, delete it and move on. Encourage others to limit emails to only those that have actionable items. Remember, the more email you send, the more you receive so take the time to reply to your emails.

Email Management Resources

Want to learn more about business email management? Download these free resources

How to Organize Your Email Inbox – Nicole Marie Richardson <http://www.inc.com/guides/2010/05/manage-email-inbox.html>

Managing your Business Email – Small Business best practices for email management – Roni Jacobson <http://www.register.com/learningcenter/web-101/managing-your-business-email/>

It's Spring Cleaning Time for Your Email Inbox <http://www.businessnewsdaily.com/2327-email-inbox-spring-cleaning.html>

Empty your Inbox: 4 ways to take control of your email <http://www.microsoft.com/atwork/productivity/email.aspx#fbid=h83n41A7GbW>

Harvard Business Review – Stop Email Overload – by Amy Gallo <http://blogs.hbr.org/hmu/2012/02/stop-email-overload-1.html>

7 Ways to Reduce Email Overload – Amy Buckner Chowdhry <http://www.inc.com/amy-buckner-chowdhry/reduce-email-overload-easy-ways.html>

