

Effectively Manage Email – and Gain Time

If you are anything like me, a full email inbox offers a world of distractions. What urgent messages are awaiting me? Who needs my help today? Which long-lost classmate has invited me to be their friend? The minutes click by as I browse recent messages, realizing that at the end of this session I responded to exactly none of the important emails, yet managed to spend more time than available and successfully created a handful of internet rabbit trails. Our reliance on email as a communication tool has unwittingly encouraged time-wasting habits and information overload for many people. *The strategies below will give you tips on how to effectively process, organize, reduce and send emails.*

1. Process Email, Don't Just Read It

A 2007 study projected that by 2010, corporate workers will send and received 199 daily emails per person (a 40 percent increase from 2007 estimates). This same study predicts that in 2009, workers will spend 41 percent of their time on email management.ⁱ These statistics alone are reason to acknowledge and analyze your email habits, and become better prepared to attack your inbox.

If you suspect that your email habits are creating inefficiencies in your day, either during work or personal hours, employing the strategies listed below will save you time and give you greater control over this daily task. These strategies will also help you to: reduce the volume of your Inbox, prioritize your tasks, and find information more easily.

- Plan your day in advance. Determine daily priorities and rank email management as one of them.
- Schedule 2-3 blocks of time during the day (on your calendar) to review and process email. Ideal times are mid-morning, after lunch, and late afternoon.
- Process email by deciding an action rather than just reading: respond, defer, delegate, or file for reference
 - **Respond** to emails if you can answer request within your scheduled time;
 - **Defer** emails that require more information or investment of time by copying or moving them to your task list. Try to respond within 48 hours, or communicate specific date to sender. Emails moved to your task list are now considered scheduled work products.
 - **Delegate** email requests to others. Determine whether or not someone else can manage the action required, or if you are waiting on someone else's actions to complete your role. If so, delegate emails to the required person and create a folder to house emails pending action or completion as a reminder to follow-up. Naming a folder "@Waiting For" in your inbox will keep the folder at the top of your inbox file structure.
 - **File** emails that you wish to keep for reference in appropriate subject folders in your inbox. This includes completed work products, reading material and other project reference information that requires no action from you. (More on organizing emails and folders in next section.)
- Refrain from reacting to email outside of a scheduled time. Unless urgent action is required, continue with your scheduled tasks and commit to dealing with new messages at a later time.

If your job is dependent on email communication throughout the day, you may need to check it more often and skim for urgent messages. However, if you are looking to improve your productivity and better manage time devoted to higher-level projects, reducing the frequency and improving the quality of your email sessions will help.

2. Organize Your Email Inbox

One advantage of electronic messaging is the reduction in paper to keep for active reference and archive filing. When you look around your office, do you have a good system working for your paper files and reference documents? If you answered yes, it's likely that your email files are similarly organized, and you can quickly find what you need. If not, it's a good bet that your email inbox is similarly cluttered and in need of a simple structure to help you focus on the important tasks and weed out the less critical items. The strategies below will help you reduce your inbox volume, organize your email so that you can always find what you need, and improve focus on priority tasks.

- **Apply consistent method for email and paper.** The organization of electronic and paper files should mimic one another in structure, to ensure a consistent method for filing active and archived information. If your paper system needs tweaking, consider what works best for you electronically and duplicate the method for incoming paper items. Scrap your old filing system entirely if it doesn't work for you and start fresh, naming and labeling files in a manner consistent with how you think.
- **Cut the inbox clutter.** Your email inbox should ideally consist of the most recent messages and those that require your action. Items can get lost in the volume if you have more than one or two screens of messages to view. If you have more than this number of emails in your inbox, and your productivity is hampered by the volume, start processing the backlog by scheduling at least 10 minutes a day for this task.

Become friends with your **delete** key, and use it judiciously. Clear your oldest emails first, sorting by date or by sender. Unless it requires action on your part, or you need it for reference, delete the email. Get back on track by purging unread newsletters (hopefully not this one), correspondence, and other non-essential messages. If you have trouble letting go of older communications, consider creating a folder for these items ("Read or Delete") so that they move out of your inbox, working through them as you have time. Temporarily commit only to reading the most recent versions until you get caught up.

- **Create several main subfolders in your inbox to filter messages.** Name these subfolders to correspond with the primary areas of your work. These will act as your reference files, the main structure of your electronic email file cabinet. These subfolders might be named using the COTA system, as described in the book The Hamster Revolution: Clients, Output, Teams and Admin. Within this structure other subfolders can be created for specific clients, work products, groups you work with, or administrative responsibilities. Rank subfolders by importance by preceding the folder name with a number (e.g, 1 Admin, 2 Clients, 3 Teams, 4 Output).

Having a structure like this allows you to easily move reference items out of your inbox, yet creates a home for easy retrieval. Experiment with categories specific to your personal

or work activities and routinely move messages out (as you take action). Performed daily, you will become efficient at this practice and the habit will become second nature.

3. Reduce Email Volume

Given the rate at which daily emails are increasing, below are some strategies to employ to tame the growth of your email inbox. If your inbox currently houses hundreds (or thousands!) of messages, take immediate steps to actively reduce the incoming volume:

- Remove yourself from mailing lists if you never get around to reading the material;
- Reduce merchant advertisements in your main inbox by using a separate email address for online shopping (Yahoo, Gmail, Hotmail);
- Request that individuals only copy you on emails when necessary and be equally considerate by not overusing "CC", "Reply All" and distribution list replies;
- Use an email auto-responder to alert people if you are unavailable or out of town;
- Install an effective spam filter, and upgrade as necessary to reduce unwanted emails;
- Reduce the volume of chain messages or jokes by asking friends to stop sending them.

4. Improve Email Quality

Make a habit of sending high quality email messages. These are messages that use descriptive titles, are clear and concise, and communicate required action.

- Use a clear subject line for your message. The subject line should relate to the body of the email. Avoid subject lines like "hello" and "question," so that recipients know what the message is about and that you can file responses better.
- For workgroups, use codes or abbreviations in your subject line to improve the clarity of emails and to better communicate action. These can include:
 - EOM: End of message, used with short subject line messages
 - URG: Urgent
 - NRN: No reply needed
 - AR: Action required
 - FYI: For your information
- Write concise emails and get to the point in the first three lines of any email you write. Use a brief greeting and summarize upfront any action required. Follow with background information or key points as necessary and close with recommended next steps.
- Communicate email quality goals with key staff or your top 10 senders and brainstorm areas of improvement.

When you apply these four strategies to your daily email management routine (processing email, organizing email, reducing the volume, and sending quality messages), your productivity will be improved (saving time and money) and a trusted system will be in place to help manage your communication load.

If you would like to discuss specific electronic organizing goals or need help with email or time management, contact Clearing House to schedule an organizing session. We will help you design and implement a system that meets individual needs.

ⁱ Radicati Group, Palo Alto, 2007.