

## Email - Don't Let It Manage You!

The greatest productivity tool of a generation? Perhaps. But email can also be a major source of stress, anxiety, and distraction.

When used appropriately, email is an incredibly useful communication tool. But, many of us feel overwhelmed by the amount of mail that we receive and need to respond to.

However, there are ways to manage your email so that you're more productive.

### Checking Email

Checking your email regularly during the day can be an effective way to keep your inbox at manageable levels. However, the constant interruption and distraction that comes this way can dramatically lower your productivity, and disrupt your ability to enter a state of flow when working on high value projects.

### Check Email at Set Times

One strategy you can use is to check email only at set points during the day. For instance, you may decide that you'll only check your email first thing in the morning, before lunch, and at the end of the day.

### When to Check Email

You can also reserve time to read and respond to email after a long period of focused work, or at the time of day when your energy and creativity are at their lowest (this means that you can do higher value work at other times).

If you're concerned that your colleagues, boss, or clients will be annoyed or confused that you're not responding to their email quickly, explain that you only check email at certain times, and that they can call you or use instant messaging if the matter is really urgent.

### The Two-Minute Rule

First, try using the "Two-Minute Rule" (a concept from David Allen, the author of "Getting Things Done") - if the email will take less than two minutes to process (a quick read, and a short answer) then take care of it right now, even if it's not a high priority.

The idea behind this is that if it takes less than two minutes to action, then reading and then storing the task away "to do later" takes longer than it would to just take care of the task now.

### Schedule Time

For emails that will take longer than two minutes to read or respond to, schedule time on your calendar, or add this as an action on your to do list.

Most email programs will allow you to highlight, flag, or star messages that need a response, so utilize this handy feature whenever you can.

## Organizing Email

Can you imagine having an inbox with nothing in it? It almost sounds too good to be true! Although a completely empty inbox (also called "inbox zero") might be unrealistic for many of us, keeping our main inbox cleared can make us more organized, and help eliminate stress.

## Filing Email

Start by setting up a simple filing system to help manage your mail. You could use broad categories titled "Action Items," "Waiting," "Reference," and "Archives." If you're able to stay on top of your folders - particularly "Action" and "Waiting" folders - you could use them as an informal To-Do List for the day.

If four categories sounds too simplistic for your needs, you can set up a more detailed system. For instance, you could create a folder for every project that you're working on, or have a set folder for each of your clubs or districts.

The advantage to creating specific folders for processing email is that it makes searching for past mail easier. Instead of scouring your entire email system, you can simply search in that particular folder.

Most email programs, such as Outlook and Gmail, allow you to establish "Rules" to help with sorting email into particular folders.

## Non-Essential Email

If you regularly receive email such as newsletters, blogs and article feeds, consider having them re-routed to another email address, or use rules, so that they're instantly delivered to a particular folder. This will help keep your primary inbox clear, and they'll be in one place, ready for you to read at a convenient time.

### **Can you request shorter emails?**

One of the best things that you can do, to limit the amount of email you need to process, is encourage your team to send you less.

For instance, if certain team members regularly send you long-winded emails, let them know. Tell them gently but firmly that because of the demand on your time, you'd appreciate emails no longer than a paragraph or two. Anything longer than that should warrant a phone call. Alternatively, they could drop by for a discussion.

## **Sending E mails**

### **Subject Lines are Headlines**

The headline in a newspaper does two things: It grabs your attention and informs you what the article is about so you can decide whether you want to read further. Email subject lines need to do the same thing. Use the subject line to inform the receiver of exactly what the email is about in a few well-chosen words. Because everyone gets emails they do not want (SPAM, etc.), appropriate use of the subject line increases the chances your email will be read and not deleted without so much as a glance.

Of course, just as it would be ridiculous to publish a newspaper without headlines, never leave the subject line blank.

### **Make One Point per Email**

The beauty of email, compared with letters, is that it doesn't cost any more to send several mails than it does to send one. So, if you need to communicate with someone about several matters, write a separate email on each subject. That way your correspondent can reply to each one in the appropriate time-frame. One topic might only require a short reply that he or she can make straight away. Another topic might require more research. By writing separate emails, you get clearer answers.

However, as with traditional business letters, the email should be clear and concise, with the purpose of the email detailed in the very first paragraph. Sentences should be kept short and to the point.

### **Specify the Response You Want**

Make sure to include any call to action you desire, such as a phone call or follow-up appointment. Then, make sure you include your contact information, including your name, title, and phone numbers. Do this even with internal messages: The easier you make it for someone else to respond (i.e. if they don't have to look up your phone number elsewhere), the more likely they are to do so.

### **Be a Good Correspondent**

If you regularly correspond using email, make sure to clean out your email inbox at least once each day. This is a simple act of courtesy and will also serve to encourage senders to return your emails in a timely manner.

If a lengthy response is required to an email, but you don't have the time to pull together the information required now, send a holding reply saying that you have received the message, and indicating when you will respond fully.

Always set your Out of Office agent when you are going to be away from your email for a day or more.

### **Tips for Effective E-mail**

1. Think before you write. Just because you can send information faster than ever before, it doesn't mean that you should send it. Analyze your readers to make certain that you are sending a message that will be both clear and useful.
2. Avoid sending copies or forwarding emails to persons not directly involved in the subject matter. Just because it does not cause extra, it does not mean that we should keep sending mails endlessly to all and sundry.
3. If you must forward an email, delete the parts that are irrelevant to the recipient. You may prefer to choose the relevant parts only to be forwarded.
4. Think carefully before you decide to click "reply to all". This is really becoming a menace. Disclosing all email addresses just because you have them is an infringement of privacy. Consider using "bcc" option for marking copies in case of bulk recipients.
5. Remember that you can always deny that you said it. But if you write it, you may be held accountable for many many moons. You may be surprised to find where your message may end up.
6. Keep your message concise. Remember that the view screen in most e-mail programs shows only approximately one half of a hard-copy page. Save longer messages and formal reports for attachments. On the other hand, do not keep your message so short that the reader has no idea what you're talking about. Include at least a summary (action or information?) in the first paragraph of your message.
7. Remember that e-mail is not necessarily confidential. Don't send anything you wouldn't be comfortable seeing published in your company's newsletter (or your community's newspaper).
8. Don't attempt to "discipline" your readers. It's unprofessional to lose control in person—to do so in writing usually just makes the situation worse.
9. Don't "spam" your readers. Don't send them unnecessary or frivolous messages. Soon, they'll quit opening any message from you.
10. Avoid ambiguity to stop a further exchange of emails seeking clarification. This mode of communication requires informality most of the time, and abundant clarity. Proxy letters through email are often counter-productive.
11. Keep the contents clear and to the point. Keep language that is yours and is identified as your voice.
12. DON'T TYPE IN ALL CAPS! IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE YELLING AT THE READERS! Remember, if you emphasize everything, you will have emphasized nothing.
13. don't type in all lower case. (unless you're e.e. cummings.) if you violate the rules of english grammar and usage, you make it difficult for the reader to read.

14. Use the "Subject" line to get the readers' attention. Replace vague lines ("Information on XYZ Project," or "Status Report Q1") with better "hooks": "Need your input on Tralfamadore Project," or "Analysis of recent problems with the new Veeblefetzter."
15. Take the time to proofread your document before you send it. Run the document through the spell checker and/or the grammar checker. Even simple typos will make you look sloppy and damage your professional credibility.
16. If you reply just to say "thanks" you are contributing to corporate spam. It's courteous, but is it necessary? It is important to be business-like.
17. Does your email really require a reply? If not just end with NRN (no reply necessary).