Managing Email Effectively

1.   Strategies for Taming Your Inbox

Manage email effectively and be more productive.

It's Monday morning.

As Linda sits down at her desk she experiences that familiar sinking sensation in her stomach...

She's not dreading the day head of her – she's dreading her email inbox!

Linda's in charge of a large team, and she receives at least 50 emails every day. Reading and responding to all of this mail takes a long time, and most of her work takes back seat to this daily chore. As a result, she's notoriously behind on projects, and she's started staying late, just to catch up.

When we use it appropriately, email is an incredibly useful communication tool. But, like Linda, 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. In this article, we'll explore strategies for doing this, so that you can get on with the real work at hand.

Note:

Keep in mind that these strategies may not work for everyone. So use your own best judgment when you think about how to manage your email.

2.   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 from multitasking   in this way can dramatically lower your productivity, and disrupt your ability to enter a state of flow   when working on high value projects.

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.

Here, it helps to set your email software to "receive" messages only at certain times, so that you're not distracted   by incoming messages. If you can't do this, at least make sure that you turn off audible and visual alerts.

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). Our article, Is This a Morning Task?   will help you identify when you're feeling least energetic, so that you can schedule time appropriately.

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.

Note:

Clearly, in some roles, you will have to check email on a regular basis, especially if your business uses email as its main communication tool. As with all of these strategies, use your judgment, based on your circumstances.

3.　　Reading Email

When you read email, you can waste hours if you don't use this time intelligently.

First, try using the "Two-Minute Rule" (a concept from David Allen, the author of Getting Things Done) when you read your mail – if the email will take less than two minutes to read and reply to, 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, it takes longer to read and then store the task away "to do later" than it would to just take care of the task now.

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

Tip:

Many of us also get lots of internal notifications. These are those "FYI" emails from the corporate office or from team members who want to keep us "in the loop." If you see your name in the "cc" field instead of the "To" field, chances are it's an FYI email. Consider filing it in a "To Read" folder, and tackle it when you have time.

4.　　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.

First, set 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 clients or sales reps.

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

Using Rules

Most email programs, such as Outlook and Gmail, allow you to establish "Rules" that sort email into a particular folder as soon as it comes in.

For instance, you might get several emails per day that notify you of sales that your company has made. You want to receive these, because you want to see what's happening, but you don't want them to clutter your inbox.

This is where you could set up a rule in your email program that moves emails with, say, "Sale Notification:" in the subject line straight to the "Sales Made" folder as soon as they come in. This means that you don't need to manually file these emails, and allows you to keep all of the sales emails in one folder.

Non-Essential Email

If you regularly receive email such as newsletters, blogs and article feeds, you could re-route these 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 to read at a convenient time.

Tip:

You can make a world of difference for your colleagues, boss, and clients when you write effective emails . This will not only save them stress and frustration, but succinct, relevant emails can also save an enormous amount of time – yours and theirs.

5.   Good Team Habits

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

For instance, if certain team members regularly send you long, drawn-out 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 your office for a discussion.

Also, promote good email and communication strategies in your organization – encourage people to use the strategies highlighted in this article and in our [Writing Effective Email](#)   and [Using Instant Messaging](#)   articles.

6.   Key Points

Most of us feel overwhelmed by email. Although it's a great communication tool, people often overuse it. When you manage it effectively, you can significantly boost your productivity.

To gain control of your inbox, start by checking and processing email only at certain times during the day. If you're concerned about the delayed response, let people know that you don't check your email constantly.

Also, try to keep your inbox as clear as possible. Organize mail using folders like "Action," "Waiting," and "Archives," And when you do check mail, use the two minute rule – immediately handle any email that you can read and responded to in two minutes or less.

You can also reduce your incoming mail by asking people to send you less, and by advocating effective email and communication strategies in your organization.