

Keep Your E-Mail Inbox Under Control (or It Will Control You!)

By Megan DeLaGarza

Technology is a concurrent blessing and curse. Email has not been around terribly long in the grand scheme of office administration, so we are just now learning the effects of its omnipresence in a plugged in world.

The biggest problem with email is that it's a huge distraction. The pressure to respond right away leads you to working off-task. An inbox that is open with notifications popping up makes this even worse. Responding to your inbox as a to-do list leads to working on the wrong priorities. It's time to break these habits to increase productivity.

The goal should be to strive for "inbox zero," a term coined by productivity expert, Merlin Mann. According to Mann, "zero" is not necessarily a reference to the number of emails in an inbox, but about the amount of time an employee's brain is in the inbox. Time and attention are limited, so when an inbox is utilized as a to-do list, productivity suffers.

Mann identifies five possible actions for each email to achieve "inbox zero": *delete, delegate, respond, defer, or do*. Simply start at the top of your inbox and work your way down using one of these five actions. Schedule yourself to process email periodically throughout the day. You could start by doing this at the top of each hour and work your way to every other hour. Eventually, only process email at the beginning of the day, before lunch, after lunch, and an hour before the end of your workday. Create a schedule that works best for you and strive to stick to it!

Below are some tips to effectively manage your email inbox:

- **Delete or archive as many new emails as possible.** Everything doesn't need a response, such as simple thank you emails, confirmation emails, etc.
- **Forward emails that can best be answered by someone else.** Once you have forwarded those emails, delete them.



- **Immediately respond to what can be answered in two minutes or less.** Move new messages that require more than two minutes to answer to a separate "response required" folder. Add these open items to your to-do list.
- **Schedule time each day to respond to the emails in the "response required" folder.** Doing so will allow you to get through those emails in a timely manner.

Part of maintaining effective time and email management, or "inbox zero", is establishing firm-wide expectations for email response times. Many of us feel like we need to respond right away when, in fact, we don't! Remember, unless it's both urgent and important, it does not need an immediate response. Therefore, establishing firm-wide expectations will help all employees achieve "inbox zero," with a higher level of productivity and a lower level of disruptions.

Once you have cleared your inbox, you should have a physical to-do list of items that need responses or further research. There is now no reason to keep your inbox open outside of your scheduled email processing time. With clear, firm-wide email response time expectations in place, less time will be spent in your email inbox. Less time there equates to more productivity on your priority tasks. "Inbox zero" will have been achieved, and, to top it all off, you'll have a nice and clean, organized email inbox to enjoy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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