HANDLING EMAILS

Getting to Zero Inbox

Introduction

There are many ways of handling your emails. The key is to find a way that works for you AND for those who send you emails. We all have a system. The question is do you have a system for dealing with incoming emails that ensures they are actioned quickly and efficiently, or do you have a system that ensures they pile up and get forgotten about?

Some people's work is entirely emailed based, but that is not the case for leaders. The danger is that we allow our emails to take up our most productive time, or spend too much time doing them.

Six Basic Principles

1. Establish a method for processing and keep this processing method as simple as you can (see below).
2. Don't do them all day, do them in batches. Research shows we are more efficient when we batch work together i.e. do our emails at the same time. We are also less likely to be distracted which enables us to focus on whatever we are doing better. Work out how long you need each day and then put that time in your diary (see below), and ideally choose one of your less productive times of the day to do them.
3. Turn them off in between the times you have identified to do them so you aren't tempted/distracted.
4. Don't check your emails (i.e. have a quick look to see what is there but not do anything with them), process them (i.e. follow the process you have identified to deal with each email).
5. Unless you have a pressing need and are very quick at typing on your phone, don't do your emails on your phone. For most people it takes more time on your phone (therefore is less efficient) and tends to mean people are doing their emails throughout the day (which goes against the second principle).
6. Avoid the temptation to cherry pick emails i.e. only do the ones that you feel interested in doing.

KEY INSIGHTS

'One of the most important soft skills you can have is figuring out how to deal with a high volume of email. And the only way to do that is to put some kind of system in place that's simple and repeatable and is going to allow you to have a life outside of email.'

Merlin Mann

'Your inbox is not your to do list.'

Graham Allcott

'Administration is the practical behind-the-scene aspect of making everything happen.'

John Truscott

'Email is an abysmal task management tool and a woefully poor scheduling tool. That leaves email as the place for communication – communication and nothing else.'

Tim Challlies

We have three levels of attention: proactive, active and inactive. Processing emails is best done in the active phase. Proactive attention is best used for the hard work of thinking, preparing talks, writing, study, planning.

Graham Allcott

Get Inbox to Zero Now

To do this you need two parallel processes:

PART ONE: ESTABLISH A METHOD FOR PROCESSING YOUR EMAILS EFFICIENTLY

- Go to your diary and put in two hours to set up a method for processing emails in the next month.
- When you get to this two hour slot, don't do anything else. Start by working out how many emails you receive on average a day. Allow three minutes per email. For example if you receive on average 30 emails a day you will need 90 minutes a day to process your emails.
- Go to your diary, place a repeating appointment/s for the amount of time needed each day to process emails (for example 90 minutes) at a time when it is most likely you will be able to do them. You can break this into two or at the most three slots throughout the day. Then process your emails at that time/those times on each day.
- Establish your folder system. The most basic system is a five folder system (see Lead On article on filing for further detail).
  1. **Inbox** Where email arrive and get processed.
  2. **Trash** (deleted) Your deleted emails folder.
  3. **Kept mail** (archive/reference) Either one folder and use the search facility to find what you want, or a series of subfolders related to your areas of work/projects.
  4. **Read** For items that you will read when you have a few spare minutes.
  5. **Waiting** Put here emails when you are waiting for someone else to do something.
- Unsubscribe from any emails you receive regularly that you rarely if ever look at. This simple tip will reduce the number of emails coming in.
- Set up a method for processing emails. A simple one involves four possible options for each email:
  1. **Delete** It will be accessible in your trash or deleted folder if you really need it.
  2. **Do it now** If it is going to take less than three minutes, do it now. Then delete the email or file it.
  3. **Defer into diary or to do list** when an email is going to take significant time or you need more information to process it (diary for any time related activity, to do list for anything else). Then delete the email, file it in kept mail, or copy the email into your diary/to do entry.
  4. **Delegate** Send it on to someone else and then if you need to keep track of it move it to your 'waiting' folder.
- Move on to Part 2.

PART TWO: DEAL WITH YOUR BACKLOG

- Create a backlog folder in your email programme.
- Place all the emails in your inbox in the backlog folder. You are now at inbox zero i.e. you have no emails in your inbox. Phew!
- Make sure you use your method for processing emails established in part one to keep the inbox empty.
- Go to the backlog folder. Arrange emails in date order starting with oldest. Click on the first one and scroll down to a date six months before the date you are doing this on. Holding the shift key and click on last email six months down. These highlights all the emails that are older than six months old. Delete all these emails. They are more than six months old. There is no point in processing them.
- Count the number of emails remaining in your backlog folder and divide by 30. This will give you how many 30 minute slots you will need to process the emails from the last six months. Go to your diary and put in 30 minute blocks over the next few weeks to process this backlog using the approach you have identified above. For example, you have 300 emails in your backlog folder, divide by 30 = ten 30 minute blocks to go in your diary. At the end of these blocks you will have emptied your backlog folder.

FIVE POTENTIAL SCHEDULES FOR PROCESSING EMAIL

- **Once a day** Ideally at around the same time each day during a mid-energy level point, and indicated by an entry in the diary. Let people know when you process emails so you set expectations around when you may get back to them.
- **Two or three regular times** Process to zero at set times two or three times a day.
- **The hourly dash** 10 minutes every hour. Works for those in particularly reactive roles or fast paced working cultures.
- **10-90** Emergency scan early in the day to check nothing urgent, then close down until time to process later in the day.
- **Extreme** Once a week for one hour.

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