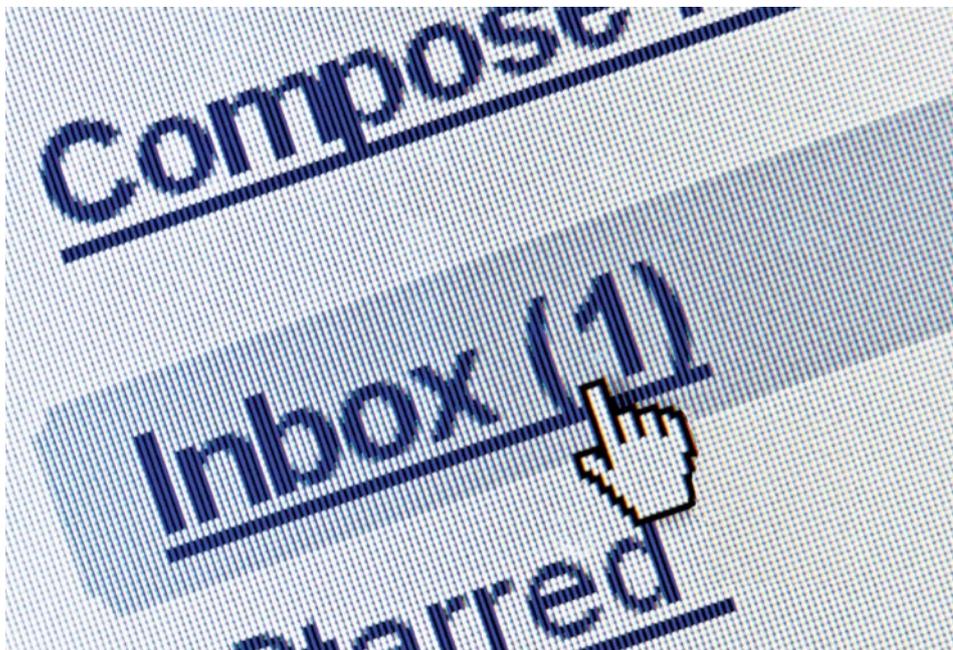


# Managing your email in 2010

Michael Tunks



The projected 2010 forecast for worldwide email traffic is 294 billion emails *per day*. Managing your daily share and contribution to this maelstrom is a skill worth mastering as it will save you time and free you from EIOS – *Email Inbox Overload Syndrome*. My terminology, but now a recognised form of work-related stress.

It used to be that the majority burden of mail decision-making was borne by the sender. Writing, enveloping, stamping and sending a letter required effort and expense so we thought harder before embarking on a communication. Nowadays, every thought and idea is instantly communicated and the burden has shifted to the recipient who is expected to respond immediately.

## Six tips to you help you manage your email

### 1 Make it a daily habit to have an empty inbox

Think about your real mail for a moment – letters and packages delivered by your postperson. When you collect your mail do you flick through the letters selecting the ones you want to deal with and put the others back in the mail box for another time? No, you take them all out and apply your processes for dealing with them – bills for paying, invitations requiring responses etc. So why not treat your email mail box (inbox) the same way?

When you go to your inbox it should be with

### How to enable or disable the new email notification

- 1 In Outlook click Tools > Options
- 2 Click Preferences
- 3 Click Advanced E-mail Options
- 4 Check or uncheck the Display a New Mail Desktop Alert (default Inbox only) box

the intent of clearing it completely – not for a quick peek to see if there is anything new there. To do this you need to visit your inbox only at specific times (see point 2) and have processes in place to deal with the variety of emails you receive (see points 3–6)

Here is your first challenge. Do this as soon as you can. Create a folder called ‘Backlog’ and move every email from your inbox to the Backlog folder. You will feel a weight lift off your shoulders when you see your inbox empty. Later in this article I’ll tell you how to deal with these ‘Backlog’ emails.

### 2 Create folders for organising your emails

There are really only two types of emails (after you’ve deleted spam and joke emails) – reference emails and action emails.<sup>1</sup> Reference emails contain information you want to keep for further use while action emails require you to do something. Much of your email communications

will contain reference information so you need an effective folder structure to file emails from your inbox. Depending on your needs you may require only a few folders – For reference, For Action, Personal etc. Personally, I have some action folders and a series of folders for projects. When actions are completed emails are filed in the appropriate project folder. Reference emails can be filed immediately.

### 3 Visit your inbox three times a day – only!

Unless you deal with urgent emails regularly, it simply isn’t necessary for you to check emails constantly through the day. “You may enjoy the distraction of the auto notifier letting you know that someone has sent you an email but this is costing you dearly in wasted productivity.” Turn the auto notifier off (see side bar) and decide on the three most suitable times each day to visit and clear your inbox.

One of these visits might be an extended time to actually deal with issues or tasks. For example, try mornings when you first arrive at work, midday and mid-afternoon for an extended time. During each visit your aim is to clear the inbox, processing your emails as described in point 2.

### 4 Triage your emails

Triage is a system for prioritising patients in an emergency situation where there are a large number of injured or ill patients. We can apply this process to emails and adopt the 4-D method:

- a Delete it
  - b Do it
  - c Delegate it
  - d Defer it
- a Delete it – if the email doesn’t contain information you are required to keep or that you might need to refer to in the next six months – delete it.
  - b Do it – if the email requires a response and you can do this in less than two minutes – do it.
  - c Delegate it – if you can delegate it do this immediately. Send a quick message (less than two minutes) and then either delete the original email or move it to a reference folder.
  - d Defer it – if the email requires a response longer than two minutes then you need to defer it. Don’t be tempted to do it now – this is your email processing time only.

In Outlook you can convert an email to an actionable task by dragging it onto your task list. This will create a task with the content of the email automatically embedded. Name the task to

clearly state the action required and you will have a defined list of actions in your task list that can be prioritised and entered on your Outlook calendar.

### 5 Use Rules to manage emails

You can set up rules to re-route emails directly to your action/reference folders or to red-flag important emails according to sender or subject text. Creating smart rules can save you time triaging emails. Regular newsletters can be routed to a "To read" or a reference folder while emails from your boss can be red-flagged and routed to a "For action" folder.

### 6 Composing emails

You can help others manage their emails and be more effective yourself by observing some simple guidelines when composing emails:

#### a Keep it short

No doubt, your recipient is also a busy person so keep your emails short and succinct clearly defining the response you require. If cc-ing the email to others make it clear what response is required from each person. For example, Alan: Please take action on ....; Bev: Alan may need your help with this; Craig: FYI only.

#### b Use the subject of your email to summarise

its contents eg. Strategies for ESL plan

#### c Separate topics require separate emails.

It is the nature of emails – we expect to deal with them quickly so when we receive an email with multiple topics we feel the burden of having to deal with several things at once. You may have sent an email like this yourself and been dissatisfied when not all items were addressed. Where practicable confine your email to one topic only and send separate emails for separate topics.

#### a Acknowledge emails received

If an email will take a little while to prepare a response then send a brief acknowledgement email (less than two minutes!) to let your correspondent know you have received their email and when you are likely to respond.

#### b Use names

Greet your correspondent by name and sign off with your name (or use a signature). Using names changes the tone of your emails.

#### c Create a signature

Create a signature with your name and contact details and have it automatically added to each email you create. (To learn how to create a signature, see [http://www.timeatlas.com/email/outlook/creating\\_outlook\\_signatures](http://www.timeatlas.com/email/outlook/creating_outlook_signatures)).

### Dealing with your backlog emails

- 1 If it's older than one month you can probably safely delete it.
- 2 Each day commit to spending time on reducing your backlog emails until they have all been dealt with. Triage them (see point 4) and move them out of the Backlog folder to your action or reference folders.
- 3 Deal with your Backlog folder during each of your three daily visits until it is empty. Then delete the Backlog folder!

### References

- 1 Sally McGhee [www.microsoft.com/atwork/productivity/email.aspx](http://www.microsoft.com/atwork/productivity/email.aspx)



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