

Increase your productivity with these email management tips

Today, there are so many methods of electronic communication available to computer users, but in the Corporate World, email is still king. The prevalence of email at work presents several challenges in trying to remain productive. Oftentimes, it seems like we are faced with email messages coming in almost every minute.

In my line of work, I have observed many who use their inboxes like huge filing cabinets sometimes containing thousands of messages with no structure. To me, there are multiple reasons for this method being inefficient, not the least that finding a message in an inbox that large takes several minutes if not longer, depending upon the system being used. This type of inefficiency, combined with a high rate of incoming messages, can lead to some fairly frustrating moments with one's computer.

Many email productivity guidelines are available via periodical articles or online, such as "Getting Things Done" by David Allen. Using these and other sources, you can effectively create an email management system of your own.

One primary goal for email management is to always ensure that there is an empty inbox at the end of each business day. This goal may sound more

TECH STRATEGY



PATRICK TAMBURRINO

idealistic than realistic, but with some practice this will quickly become a reality.

So one may ask "How do you empty your inbox but still keep track of all of the things you need to do?" The answer is simple, and broken down into these steps:

First, create three to four "top level" folders, or folders that are organized toward the top of your folder list in Outlook, Apple Mail, Gmail or other software. These

folders should be called:

- Action
- Waiting on...
- Read Later
- Filed

Note: If your software alphabetizes folders, simply insert an @ in front of the folder name, or you can put a number in front of each sub-folder:

Second, go through your inbox and make decisions. For short emails that can be responded to quickly (in less than one minute each), go ahead and respond. Then file these messages in "Filed." Or if you prefer, you may create your own folder sub-structure un-

der "Filed." Remember to try and keep it simple.

Third, review your remaining email messages:

- Which ones require action on your part? Put these messages in the "Action" folder.
- Now, which email messages can you not take action on until someone else helps you or answers an open question? Place these items in the "Waiting on..." folder.
- Lastly, which email messages would you like to review some day, but simply do not have the time to do so now, and are not critical (such as newsletters, advertisements, special offers, etc.) These messages should be moved to the "Read Later" folder.

Now that you have organized your initial mail messages into this system, set aside 10-15 minutes each morning to review all messages that come into your inbox between 5 p.m. and 8 a.m. Follow the same steps as above for responding to the ones you can, quickly, and by filing the rest. Then go through your "Action" and "Waiting on..." folders to determine if you need to follow-up with someone, or if you can respond to the more involved messages appropriately.

There are a few keys here that were mentioned above that will help you be

successful with this system:

- Being decisive and not spending more than a few seconds on each action (answering or filing)
- Creating a structure like the one above so that every message gets filed
- Clearing your inbox at the end and beginning of each day

Also, it is a good idea to try and force yourself to only check email at specific intervals. It is sometimes all too easy to sit and wait for messages to come in: this is known as "emergency scan mode." By employing the review and respond system that is outlined above, and by only checking your inbox once per hour, for example, you will be able to more effectively schedule your work and avoid this dangerous cycle.

This process can sound daunting if you are used to working in a reactive mode with regard to email. But if you adopt these guidelines and make a system of your own that follows these basic rules, you will find yourself becoming more productive quickly and avoiding the vicious cycle of email mismanagement.

PATRICK TAMBURRINO is CEO and technostrategist of Tamburrino Inc., a technology strategy and management company. Contact him at (901) 489-8408, patrick@tamburrino.com or via the web at www.tamburrino.com