

PRACTICE TIP



The Empty Inbox: Total Victory Over E-Mail

By Rick Jeffries

More information comes at us more quickly than ever before. We routinely store it by the gigabyte—a billion typewritten characters—at one time. Our e-mail boxes rapidly become parking lots for huge amounts of information. Left untended, these parking lots can become overgrown junkyards, filled with an incomprehensible tangle of data—some totally irrelevant, some critical but overlooked.

After conquering the paper on my desk (as discussed in the previous issue of *The Brief*), I set out to conquer my e-mail. Armed with the teachings of

Merlin Mann and Dustin Cole, and informed by my own experience with productive office discipline, I found that I got better at my job through the process of systematically eliminating my e-mail. I am pleased to report that I keep my inbox empty, or nearly so, at all times. I suggest that you could significantly increase your productivity by keeping your electronic inbox empty as well.

The key to victory over e-mail is *processing*. Processing is reading an e-mail once to determine what needs to be done, keeping track of all the things

PRACTICE TIP

required to do, and then filing or deleting the e-mail. I don't answer all my e-mail at once; that's simply not possible. I don't delete it all after reading it; that is not prudent. Processing my e-mail to zero, together with my other office discipline, gives me a continuously updated plan for my day.

An Inbox Is Not a To Do List

"Come on," you say. "My inbox is my 'to do' list! Right there, I know what I need to do. The items in my inbox represent a handy, constantly updated list of what I need to do. Right?"

Wrong. Here's why.

First, e-mail does not set priorities. Everything you have to do sits in your inbox, usually with the oldest items at the bottom. Maybe your most overdue work has been pushed off the bottom of the screen and out of your mind. Maybe you've got a gem of a client—someone who does not bother you with reminder e-mails—and you reward their trust with inaction. Also, your inbox makes no distinction between the two-minute question and the 50-hour project. Each appears equally as one message.

Second, e-mail does not tell you what is next. The e-mail from your secretary about next week's deadline may remind you that you need to write a brief, but it does not tell you *the next thing you need to do*. Maybe that is collecting a file from an associate. Maybe it is commissioning some research from a colleague. Maybe it is scheduling a meeting with a client. Maybe it is rescheduling all your appointments for Friday and locking yourself in until what you need to do is done. Your unprocessed message list tells you none of this.

Remember that e-mail is not the only place "to do's" come from. You have mail, you have a phone, you occasionally accept appointments. Your tasks come from all of these sources, but they do not pop magically into your e-mail just because you have to do them. You need a list that integrates all sources of your work.

Also remember that some things just need to be deleted. The bake sale announcement, the spam ad for pills, the shopping lists and personal items, none of these have lasting value and they should be deleted quickly. Until deleted, they obscure the view of the critical professional tasks before you. Systematic processing of your inbox is the only way to get a handle on everything you are—and should be—doing. Processing eliminates the irrelevant.

I find I cannot make sense of my priorities until (1) I take stock of everything that needs some action, (2) I decide what that action is, (3) I take some reasoned approach to figuring out which things to do first, and (4) I identify which things need resources that others

can help me acquire while I am busy doing something else. Processing meets all of those criteria.

Processing E-Mail: Exercising Discipline

I'm not going to lie to you: Keeping an empty inbox requires some attention. It doesn't do itself. On the other hand, the gains in productivity I've realized from these techniques far outstrip the time I spend on them. In other words, you can expect a significant return on your time investment if you are diligent in the processing disciplines.

Several times a day, process your inbox to zero. Each time you open your mail application, process every item in your inbox. This has three steps.

Decide what to do next. Every message is pregnant with action. Because we are professionals, we often get to decide what that action is. Nearly every e-mail should be treated to one of the Four D's I outlined in my previous article.

Delete. Lots of e-mail is junk. Some messages are born junk; others become unnecessary once you have absorbed the information they contain. Scan the e-mail from the state bar with this week's court cases to see if there is anything of interest, then delete the message. They make law libraries for a reason. Delete anything it is not malpractice to delete. Be swift and ruthless.

Delegate. Some e-mails represent a task for someone else. Your client wants a copy of the Jones discovery responses. Forward this to your secretary with a request for action. Done.

Do. Some messages require action that will require a tenth of a billable hour or less to complete. Always do them immediately. A request for lunch? Open the calendar, say yes, book the date, and then delete. Done. That one-word "thanks" from your shifty adversary? Proof he received your last e-mail. File it. Done. Think of your e-mail box as the inside of a nuclear reactor: Do your business there and get out as soon as you can, for your own sake.

Defer. Of course, some messages suggest action that cannot be taken immediately, usually because you need something else. You might need input from a colleague, knowledge of the actual law, or even just time to think about something. So get out your to do list and write something like

- Review derivative action statute for Jones.
- Ask Jim about Smith interrogatories.
- Think about Anderson tax problem.
- Return call to Johnson re interrogatory answers.

Of course, this list should be the same place where your other to do's go to wait in line—those from mail,

PRACTICE TIP

from fax, or from a person visiting your office. Now you've got things to do, and these can be sorted, prioritized, and, most importantly, done.

I use Microsoft's powerful but simple OneNote 2007 for keeping my daily list. A colleague uses the Tasks pane of Microsoft Outlook, where she can assign the task a due date, a reminder, and identify the next thing to do.

When you defer, you can schedule the resources you need, even if it is a half-hour by yourself in an empty coffee shop to think about the Anderson thing.

Dispose of the message. Once you've processed the message and decided what action to take, its value as an action prompt has dissipated. Now you can do whatever you think is productive with the message. There are two possibilities.

The first is to file it. I separate things by client and matter and file them in my office document management system. I do this for two reasons: (1) e-mail correspondence is part of the record of the engagement, and (2) I know firsthand what it is like to have to sort through thousands of unfiled messages in response to subpoenas and discovery requests served on my clients. I've wanted to claw my own eyes out after looking at e-mail for days on end, pawing through hundreds of megabytes of interoffice gossip, useless forwards from netiquette-challenged relatives, and personal exchanges I'd rather know nothing about, all while seeking a few messages containing responsive information.

Don't have a document management system? Use the folders in your e-mail, making sure to pull them out of your mailbox (by export, portable document format (.pdf), or some other means) when you close your file.

Finally, as suggested in my previous article, do not print your e-mail. It is a waste of time, money, paper, and data.

Your second option, after handling a message, is to delete it. Internal communications, personal communications, and the usual crud that comes with having the @ symbol in your life should just disappear.

Lather, rinse, repeat. Keep repeating the prior two steps on every message in your mailbox until it is empty. Then go back to something productive until your next e-mail break. Usually, I process e-mail only when I'm done with one task and prepared to start on another. If I'm engaged in an all-day project, this might be once or twice. If I'm making and taking calls all day, I might process eight or ten times.

Further Tips to Keep You Efficient

E-mail notification issues. If you have decided you want to increase your productivity by becoming e-mail's master rather than its servant, you can

do a few things right now to begin. Put down this magazine and turn off every e-mail notification. You receive several notifications when a new message arrives: a pleasant little chime sounds, an icon appears in the system tray, or a translucent window with a ghostly preview of the message pops up. Shut them off. All of them, right now. Why?

First, your attention is too precious to waste. As productivity gurus continue to dispel the myth of multitasking, they regularly emphasize one point: When your brain gets interrupted, you lose a lot of time getting your focus back. Why stop whatever revenue-producing activity you are engaged in to zoom over to your mail application every time you hear the ding or to see the new message icon, like a puppy who hears the box of biscuits—only to find out the freight elevator is on the blink?

Second, e-mail is not an instantaneous communication medium. It is supposed to be time-shifted. They have a medium for instant messaging, called instant messaging. (I don't use it.) Train your clients and colleagues that urgent matters should be handled on the phone, and then train an assistant to figure out what is really urgent, while you do the task you've set aside time for.

Perhaps you cannot afford to answer every e-mail at your absolute convenience, but you don't have to answer all of them instantaneously, either. Even if the message is important, it is unlikely that it is so urgent that it warrants breaking off whatever it was you were doing. So disable your mail notifications today and go home 15 minutes earlier tonight. Make the same changes on your smart phone. The ding from your pocket has only been irritating the rest of us anyway.

Stop checking your e-mail. Decide right now that you are only going to look at your e-mail when you are ready and have time to process it. Constantly "checking" your e-mail—that is, looking at it and doing nothing with it—is worse than a waste of time. Now you've got psychic overhead from stuff you haven't done anything about. Why do that to yourself? You don't run out to a real mailbox every five minutes; why do so electronically? Work for a while, stop to process all your new e-mail, and then get back to work.

Once daily, process sent items to zero. The inbox is just the beginning. Your Sent folder (called Sent Items in Microsoft Outlook) is the silent killer, the unblinking eye that sees everything you do, the archivist of your misspent days. Ignore this for long enough—and many do—and you will be overrun with thousands of e-mails lurking beneath the surface of your mail application.

PRACTICE TIP

Every day, process your sent mail to zero. I use sent items as a prompt for my time sheet. The little tasks that I neglected to write down on my time sheet can be sought out at closing time and will add a few clicks to my billable hours every day. Sent items, too, get sorted by client and matter, except I liberally delete strictly internal messages when they are not substantive.

Take out the trash. And keep taking it out. You probably have a Trash or Deleted Items folder. Purge it, empty it—right now. You had the good sense to throw these items out, and you haven't looked in the folder since you did.

Microsoft Outlook and some other mail applications can be set to automatically purge deleted items every day or every time you close the application. I highly recommend this practice. Your decision to delete was just and merciful—to you. Let it stand.

Strategies for the Hopeless Inbox

Too late, you say. I've come to you with this life-changing information, but right now you have 22,000 messages in your inbox, 14,000 sent items. Well, first of all, let this be a lesson. Like so many hygiene tasks, taking care of your e-mail is only a nasty job if you neglect it. Second, you probably think in terms of one message at a time, and the good news is that you do not have to individually move 22,000 items.

Two tools are at your disposal for cutting like messages from the vast herd: sorting and searching. Every postmillennial e-mail application has these tools.

Sorting is the process of grouping all your messages according to a certain criterion. By default, most people see them in reverse chronological order, with most recent messages sitting on top. But you can sort by sender, recipient, date, subject line, etc. Chances are that you can find everything you received from one client this way, select all those items at once, and drag them off to a file folder en masse.

Searching is the process of identifying every message that meets a certain criterion. Today's mail applications have powerful search features that can look inside the bodies of messages (though *not* usually into their attachments), the subject field, or just about any other aspect of the message. Use specific terms unique to each case—"Wahoo" will probably be much more effective than "Plaintiff"—to pull matter-specific messages from your vast stockpile.

If you haven't already, you must master the art of highlighting multiple messages at once, either with control-clicking to pick several messages, one message

at a time, or shift-clicking to select multiple messages in a continuous range. Find any 10-year old to show you how.

Of course, you should find many opportunities to delete dozens or hundreds of messages at once. Invitations to seminars you'll never attend? Gone. The office manager's harangues about keeping the microwave clean? History. Your failed fantasy baseball season or candle-party business? No record need remain. Incidentally, you should do all of your personal business in a free Web e-mail account such as Yahoo or Gmail—and you can be as sloppy as you want there.

If you are truly desperate to escape your old life, then you can do an e-mail Chapter 11. That is, empty all of your inbox and sent items into one folder—call it Chapter 11 if you want—and sort and search it when you can. But beware. Just like the debtor with a fresh start, you must change your habits immediately, and you must commit to restructuring your old records or you will just make things worse than they were before. An e-mail Chapter 7—wherein you simply delete all your e-mail—is likely to provoke a visit from the Counsel for Discipline.

A Parting Thought: Practice Law, Not E-Mail

We did not go to law school because we wanted to spend our entire day staring at our e-mail messages. Adopt these few simple disciplines, apply them regularly, build a productive plan for every day, and you will find that e-mail can be your servant rather than your master. ■

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