

# 4 WAYS TO RECLAIM YOUR INBOX

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**F**eeling overwhelmed by the massive amount of emails you have to sift through on a daily basis? You aren't alone. A recent article in the online magazine "Wired" referred to managing email as "fighting a forest fire with a bucket." Indeed, the average knowledge worker spends 28 percent of their week reading and answering emails, according to a McKinsey Global Institute July 2012 report. That's over 11 hours a week. That's a lot of time, and should that time be spent unproductively, the long-term costs could be staggering — what is meant to be a tool used to increase a company's efficiency can instead turn into an overwhelming productivity drain.

So with that in mind, I'd like to share some tips for reclaiming your inbox so that you can once again reap the benefits of your email tool rather than dread your inbox screen.



## EDUCATE

### 1 **CONSCIOUSLY DECIDE WHETHER YOU WANT TO SPEND YOUR TIME PROACTIVELY BUILDING YOUR BUSINESS OR REACTIVELY PUTTING OUT FIRES.**

Having the right mindset is a critical piece. When we allow ourselves to be overloaded by our inboxes, we can default to a reactive style that downgrades our communication quality, which frustrates employees and clients who have to email us

back for clarification. In addition, it pulls us into urgent but not important tasks. Recognize the need for you to make those 11 or more hours a week as productive as possible, and commit to taking a proactive approach.

### 2 **STOP THE FLOOD OF DISTRACTIONS.**

Lack of focus, in my opinion, is the major impediment to productivity

at the office. Email can be one of the biggest distractors from the task at hand. Hopping in and out of your inbox constantly throughout the day forces you to task switch, which has been proven to be an incredibly ineffective approach to time management as well as a cause of brain fatigue. If you really want to reclaim your inbox, you must learn to stop the onslaught of distractions. Here are some ways to do just that:

- Turn off email notifications (visual and audible). Each notification is an interruption and a drain on your brain. If the idea is terrifying to you, don't panic and read on.
- Turn off return receipt requested. Unless it is absolutely necessary,



stop using this feature. It can be annoying to the recipient and is literally asking for more email.

- **Opt out.** Every month you are flooded with newsletters and sales pitches you don't read. Spending the 15 seconds to opt out once will prevent you from scrolling through or deleting emails from that recipient for years to come, saving you more time than you realize.

### 3 **AUTOMATE, AND THEN AUTOMATE SOME MORE.**

Let's be honest. How much of your email's features do you actually use? Chances are you are underutilizing this tool and consequently passing on a lot of opportunity to systematize your email. Here are some tips for automation that I picked up from a book called "The 15 Minute Inbox" by Joost Wouters (who I highly recommend).

- **IF YOU WRITE IT TWICE, AUTOMATE IT.** If there is information that you have to write in emails repeatedly, set up an automation system. For instance, program different signatures into your email tool so that signing an email takes, at most, a couple of clicks. Have to send directions to your office frequently? Use text expanders (downloadable software), or save blocks of text so you can copy and paste rather than retype every time.
- **USE FILTERS.** Email programs such as Outlook and Gmail allow you to program filters that will automatically sort and process your emails for you. For instance, you can program a rule that will move any email that comes into your inbox with the word "Newsletter"

in the subject line into a folder called "Newsletters" or "Read Later." Do you get invoices emailed to you that you only look at once a week or once a month? Have them syphoned off into a "Financial" folder that you can check as needed. A good email system will let you do much more than just move emails around, too. You can make it very granular, such as redirecting emails to other people on your team, flagging emails as important, printing selected emails and more. If you take nothing else from this article, start utilizing filters!

### 4 **PROCESS YOUR EMAIL WITH THE BIGGER PICTURE IN MIND.**

- **CONSIDER THE RECIPIENT'S PERSPECTIVE.** If every email you send is deliberate and includes all necessary information, your recipient will need to follow up with you less, reducing your overall number of emails.
- **SEND LESS EMAIL.** Sometimes email is the way to go, but chances are you get roped into ongoing email conversations that span hours or days when they could have been wrapped up in a two-minute phone call.
- **PROCESS YOUR EMAIL IN SCHEDULED BATCHES.** At first, this could be 15 minutes every hour or maybe 45-minute blocks twice a day. Either way, if you block off time to process your email uninterrupted, you will process it quicker and more efficiently. Just be sure to explain your system to coworkers so they don't panic at the change in behavior.
- **TOUCH EACH EMAIL ONCE.** Each time you encounter an email in your inbox you should either:

1. Do it - if it takes two minutes or less, just do it.
2. Defer it - move it to an "Action Today" or "Follow Up" folder to be addressed later.
3. Delegate it - forward it on with specific action items outlined, and then remove it from your inbox.
4. Delete it - delete or file it if it requires no further action.

While these ideas won't solve your email issues overnight, a slow and steady implementation of these rules will begin to create time and space in your week. Use it to focus less on reactive inbox firefighting and more on what's most important for you to grow your business.



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