

10 Ways to Streamline Your Email

“My email is out of control! How can I manage it better?” This is one of the biggest complaints I hear when clients first come to me. Whether you’re receiving 20 emails or hundreds a day, you’re probably spending too much time reviewing these missives which doesn’t leave enough time to complete your other work.

By following the 10 tips below you can reduce the amount of email you receive, learn to process it more effectively, as well as be more proactive and productive with your time.

1. **Unsubscribe.** About one-third of your email is junk. Rather than simply deleting these messages (and continuing to get them in the future), take a few seconds to scroll to the bottom and click the unsubscribe link. This is a *permanent* solution! If you don’t receive it, it cannot junk up your inbox. It’s an easy way to cut down on the number of emails in your inbox. (**NOTE:** do *not* click on any link in emails that look like **spam** since this lets the sender know your email address is real. Instead use your spam filter which can stop all email from an address or domain.)
2. **Turn off pop-up boxes and bells.** Such a small thing can make such a big difference! Every time the bell dings or you see the box, you cannot fight the urge to check your email. By turning off these interruptions, you will stay focused and finish your tasks more quickly. When you’re at a good stopping point, then check your messages. You’ll be amazed at how much more you accomplish with this one tiny change.
3. **Use Folders.** Folders on the left-hand side keep emails organized and decrease the amount in your inbox. Use folders for both reference and action emails. Separate these two types of items by using the following naming convention “z_FolderName” for reference and “_FolderName” for action. Using this naming standard, email programs will alphabetize action folders at the top for easy access and reference folders at the bottom.
4. **Keep a clean inbox.** You may not believe this is possible, but if you’re using file folders (see #3), rules (see #5), and the T.A.R. principle (see #6) you can manage your inbox down to zero every day. An empty inbox will help you feel more in control and less overwhelmed. (Try it and see!)
5. **Use Rules.** Rules automate your inbox so you don’t have to review every incoming message. Rules are perfect for emails that you want to review or process at some point in the future, such as newsletters, coupons, timesheets, etc...For instance, if you receive newsletters from an industry association, set up a rule that specifies “all newsletters from that association will automatically go to the _Newsletters folder.” On Friday afternoon, when it’s slow, you can review this folder. (**NOTE:** Most, if not all, email programs can do this.)
6. **Use the T.A.R. Principle.** Every email falls into one of three categories - Trash, Action, or Reference. For each message in your inbox, ask yourself “Can I delete it?” If so, then delete it! If you cannot, ask “Is action required?” If *no action is needed*, then the email is reference and should be filed by dragging it into a folder on the left-hand side. If action is required, then ask “What is the next step I need to do?” Write that step on your to-do list, then create a folder for that project on the left-hand side and drag the email into it. (If using Outlook, drag the email directly to the task icon and generate a new task.)

7. **Send fewer emails.** If you want to receive fewer emails, then send fewer emails!
8. **Use AutoArchive.** This is an automated way to clean out your *entire* email system or just *one* folder based on the settings you choose. For example, if you receive coupons that you don't always get to, forget manually cleaning out the coupon folder, rather set your AutoArchive to move messages over four weeks old directly to the trash. (You can set any time frame from one day to several years.)
9. **Don't answer emails immediately.** You train people how to treat you. If you always respond immediately, then the receiver will expect an immediate answer. Instead set an expectation that you will reply within a *reasonable* amount of time. Add this timeframe to your signature - for instance, "I will respond to emails within 24 hours" or whatever time frame makes sense for your business. This will help you *and* your recipients because they will know when they can expect to hear from you. Thus eliminating the "Did you get my email yet?" phone call. (Turning off the bells and pop-up boxes (see #2) will help you stop this habit as well.)
10. **Don't use Reply All.** Few things irritate people more than receiving "Reply All" responses - email that is meant for the sender, but everyone receives the reply, i.e. "Thanks, Sally!" or "See you there!" If you are an offender, change this habit! Remove the "Reply All" button from your tool bar if you have to.

These tips will help you decrease the amount of email you receive, manage your inbox more effectively, and increase your productivity. Given that you spend about one minute per email (60 minutes for 60 emails), minimize time spent on this activity so you have more time for your "real" work!

Lorena Prime, Owner of Clearly Organized, speaks at companies and organizations on Time Management and other productivity topics. She uses a methodology that helps people shorten routine office work and save 1-2 hours every day. What could you do with an extra 1-2 hours? For more information, visit www.ClearlyOrganizedLife.com or call 617-633-2199.

