

4 ways to take control of your e-mail Inbox

Do you have an effective way to process and organize your e-mail so that you can get to an empty Inbox on a routine basis? If you have lots of e-mail in your Inbox—we know people with as many as 7,000 messages—you might want to rethink your processing methods. Really, it is possible to empty your Inbox. The key is to evaluate how you are processing and organizing your e-mail and make some changes.

No doubt you've opened an e-mail and thought, "Hmmm, not sure what to do with this. I'll deal with it later!"—and promptly closed the message. If you do this over and over again, it doesn't take long to end up with several hundred (or thousand) messages in your Inbox.

Developing a new approach to processing your Inbox will help you to gain more control, improve your response time, and keep up with critical actions and due dates.

This article will cover 4 key factors that will help you process your e-mail more efficiently.

1. Set up a simple and effective e-mail reference system

The first step toward an organized Inbox is understanding the difference between reference information and action information.

Reference information is information that is not required to complete an action; it is information that you want to keep in case you need it later.

Action information is information you must have to complete an action.

Most people receive a considerable amount of reference information through e-mail. Sometimes as much as one-third of your e-mail is reference information. So it is essential to have a system that makes it easy to transfer messages from your Inbox into your e-mail reference system. An E-mail Reference System is a series of e-mail file folders where you store reference information to ensure you have easy access to it later. Learn more about [setting up an E-mail Reference System](#). Once you take care of filing your reference information, you can use the next three steps to handle e-mail you have to do something with, your action information.

2. Schedule uninterrupted time to process and organize e-mail

How many interruptions do you get every each day? It's nearly impossible to complete anything when you allow constant interruptions from the phone, people stopping by your office, and instant messaging. So it's critical that you set aside uninterrupted time to process and organize your e-mail.

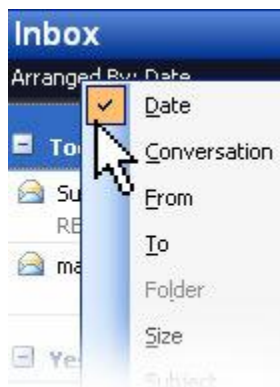
Many e-mail messages require you to make a decision. Good decisions require focus, and focus requires uninterrupted attention. You need to establish a regular time each day to process your e-mail so that you can empty your Inbox. Of course, you can scan your e-mail during the day for urgent messages or requests from your boss.

Book yourself a recurring appointment for an hour a day to process e-mail, and mark it as "busy." During this time don't answer the phone or take interruptions, and work only on processing your Inbox.

At first, keeping these appointments will take discipline, but over time the discipline becomes habit. And once you get to zero e-mail in your Inbox, you'll see the value of this one hour a day and you'll stick to it like glue.

3. Process one item at a time, starting at the top

When you sit down to process your e-mail, the first step is to sort it by the order in which you want to process it. For example, you can filter by date, subject, or who the e-mail is from. In Outlook 2003, click the Arranged By: box at the top of your Inbox and click how you want to arrange your e-mail.



Filter your e-mail by a number of different options.



Tip: If you use Outlook 2003, enable the preview pane so that you can view your messages without having to open them. To enable the preview pane, on the View menu, click AutoPreview.

Resist the temptation to jump around in your Inbox in no particular order. Begin processing the message at the top of your Inbox and only move to the second one after you've handled the first. This can be hard at first when you might have thousands of messages in your Inbox. But as you reduce the number of messages over a few sessions, eventually you'll get to the point where you can process the 60-100 messages you get every day and get your Inbox down to zero every day.

4. Use the "Four D's for Decision Making" model

The "Four D's for Decision Making" model (4 D's) is a valuable tool for processing e-mail, helping you to quickly decide what action to take with each item and how to remove it from the Inbox.

Decide what to do with each and every message

How many times have you opened, reviewed, and closed the same e-mail message over and over? Some of those messages are getting lots of attention but very little action. It is better to handle each e-mail message only once before taking action—which means you have to make a decision as to what to do with it and where to put it. Under the 4 D's model, you have four choices:

- Delete it
- Do it
- Delegate it
- Defer it

DELETE IT

Generally you can delete about half of all the e-mail you get. But some of you shudder when you hear "delete." You're hesitant to delete messages for fear you might need them at some point. That's understandable, but ask yourself honestly: What percentage of information that you keep do you actually use?

If you do use a large percentage of what you keep, then what you're doing is working. But many of you are keeping a lot more than you use. Here are some questions to ask yourself to help you decide what to delete:

Does the message relate to a meaningful objective you're currently working on? If not, you can probably delete it. Why hang on to information that doesn't relate to your main focus?

Does the message contain information you can find elsewhere? If so, delete it.

Does the message contain information that you will refer to within the next six months? If not, delete it.

Does the message contain information that you're required to keep? If not, delete it.

DO IT (in less than two minutes)

If you can't DELETE IT, then decide, "What specific action do I need to take?" and "Can I DO IT in less than two minutes?" If you can, just DO IT.

There is no point in filing an e-mail or closing an e-mail if you can complete it in less than 2 minutes. Try it out—see how much mail you can process in less than 2 minutes. I think you will be extremely surprised and happy with the results. You could file the message, you could respond to the message, or you could make a phone call. You can probably handle about one third of your e-mail messages in less than two minutes.

DELEGATE IT

If you can't DELETE IT or DO IT in two minutes or less, can you DELEGATE IT?

If you can delegate it, do it right away. You should be able to compose and send the delegating message in about two minutes. Once you delegate the action, delete the original message or move it into your e-mail reference system.

DEFER IT

If you cannot DELETE IT, DO IT in less than two minutes, or DELEGATE IT, then the action required is something that only you can accomplish and that will take more than two minutes. Because this is your dedicated e-mail processing time, you need to DEFER IT and deal with it after you are done processing your e-mail. You'll probably find that about 10 percent of your e-mail messages have to be deferred.

There are two things you can do to defer a message: turn it into an actionable task or turn it into an appointment. When you're using Outlook 2003, you can DEFER e-mails with actions by turning the e-mail into a task on your Task List. Name the task to clearly state what action is required so that you don't have to reopen the e-mail message. The result is a clearly defined list of actions in your task list that you can prioritize and schedule to complete on your Calendar

Do it daily

Using the 4 D's model on a daily basis makes it easier to handle a large quantity of e-mail. Our experience shows that on average, people can process about 100 e-mail messages an hour. If you receive 40 to 100 messages per day, all you need is one hour of uninterrupted e-mail processing time to get through your Inbox. Our statistics show that of the e-mail you receive:

- 50 percent can be deleted or filed
- 30 percent can be delegated or completed in less than 2 minutes
- 20 percent can be deferred to your Task List or Calendar to complete later

Of course, if you have a backlog of hundreds of messages, it will take time to get to the point where your daily routine keeps you up to date. It's important to get that backlog down, so I would suggest setting chunks of time aside to work through it. Then you can really enjoy processing your messages every day using the 4 D's.

<http://www.microsoft.com/atwork/productivity/email.aspx>

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