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Are You Really Being Paid To Read 200 Emails A Day?

Cleaning Up Corporate Email Pollution

Email is a wonderful productivity tool - but usually it seems like someone else is being productive at your expense! How do you harness the power of email, without being a slave to your inbox or becoming addicted to your Smartphone? Read on for some proven tips and techniques which will sharpen your communications, put your inbox on a diet, and give you and your team more time selling and less time typing.

The process is fundamentally simple. Your goals are to:

- Change your attitude towards email.
- Reduce the number of worthless, extraneous and totally unnecessary emails you receive each and every day.
- Send out fewer emails.
- Handle those emails you do send/receive more efficiently.

Change Your Attitude

I may get drummed out of the corner-office executive club for saying this - but there is no rule which says you have to instantly respond and answer email, even if it is from your boss. The arrival of email seems to trigger the onset of adult ADD, so:

1. **Unplug the machine.** Almost every email system has a setting for receiving mail which says "*poll every xx minutes*". Either set *xx* to something like 60, or turn it off completely and only synchronize your mail manually. You will be amazed how much time this saves you, as many problems will get fixed by other people and you don't have to needlessly, and constantly, switch thought processes from one task to another and back again.

2. **Put your phone on silent mode.** Unless you are expecting a life changing message, or you are a physician on call - turn off the vibrate mode. Not only does vibrate (or even ring) mode distract you, it annoys the heck out of everyone else around you. And once you break the seal and look at one message, you'll be in the thumbs-up and head-down posture the rest of the day.
3. **Train the people who email you the most.** Especially if you are in a customer-facing position, they (the righteous emailers) have no right to expect you to respond inside 30 minutes. So, even if you can respond rapidly to these folks, don't do it - wait for a couple of hours when appropriate. Should you decide to start answering emails between Friday evening and Sunday afternoon you are on the slippery road to electronic assimilation by the machine.

How To Handle Email More Efficiently

Just like cars, perfume and sales methodologies your system is a matter of personal choice. It does not matter which you use, as long as you have a methodology and stick to the discipline it enforces. Note this does not mean the system a former employee of mine used; which was to keep absolutely everything in a 6,000 message inbox and archive it every few months.

1. **Make your inbox a real inbox.** It is a place where new mail arrives and waits to be processed. It is not a place to store pending tasks/to-dos or even to keep emails you don't know what to do with. Your working inbox should be less than a screen full of messages, which equates to 20-25 emails for most of us.
2. **Create some storage folders.** You do, after all, need a place to store all those valuable messages. I prefer creating a number of very descriptive folders with names such as *Support Issues* or *Beta Program Feedback*. Always set up a separate *customers* folder and then create a subfolder for each customer or sales opportunity you touch.
3. **Use the built-in rules engines.** Most email systems have tools which allow you to define rules to handle your email as it enters your inbox and reroute the messages. You probably subscribe to some internal or external newsletters or publications - file them automatically. If you get daily status reports on anything - file them automatically. For managers who receive automated expense, hiring or purchasing requests - file them too. Just remember to set time aside each day to read them.

4. **Color up your world.** Microsoft Outlook has a nifty feature which allows you to color code messages based upon who sent them. If you are a high email individual or a visual learner this can prove to be very useful. My system does the following:
 - Red - My boss, his boss, executives and my primary HR contact.
 - Green - My direct reports
 - Purple - Anyone else in my department/division
 - Grey - My peers within the company
 - Brown - My "watch list" - typically Sales Directors and Area Managers
 - Yellow - Automated Expense, HR, Purchasing and other approval requests

5. **Take a trip to OHIO.** The acronym stands for Only Handle It Once. When you do perform your hourly check of your inbox - take immediate action whenever you can. Either respond if it is a quick item, read and file if it is an FYI, delete it whenever possible (unless of course it is from a customer and you are the primary recipient), delegate it if appropriate or flag it as a task/to-do and move it to a "Take Action" folder. Just don't let it sit in your inbox once you have read it.

Send Out Fewer Emails

By reducing your contribution to email pollution you have the double-edged effect of making others more productive too. Email is a wonderful solution for quick and concise communications, yet how much of your inbox is taken up with email chains or messages copying forty people?

1. **Your Mother was wrong!** You do not have to send back a *thank you* every time someone helps you out. Reserve the thanks for special occasions, and responding to the nice people in HR, Finance and the office manager. Better yet, if you are in the same office, get off your rear and go say it in person.

2. **You have legs for a reason.** Should you catch yourself trading emails, or even Instant Messaging, with someone less than fifty yards away, smack yourself hard in the forehead and get out of your chair. As well as getting exercise you'll gain the benefit of looking someone directly in the eye during a conversation. In the world of office politics always remember it is easier to forward a controversial email than a controversial face to face conversation.

3. **Disable the "Reply All" button.** This button should be labeled "**SPAM**" for many people I know. Just think very carefully if everyone on the distribution list needs the benefit of you being the ninth respondent to say "me too" or "I agree". The RA button is also the leading cause of email embarrassment when someone who shouldn't read your response actually does. In particular make sure no external clients are included in what should be an internal conversation.

Receive Fewer Emails

The corollary to sending out less email is that you will receive fewer as well, and if you train your staff, peers and even your boss to cut down on the traffic you'll have more time to spend in front of customers, or doing whatever you are really being paid to do.

1. **Exercise your power.** If you are a manager or have supervisory authority then there comes a time to stop an email conversation. It is perfectly acceptable to respond to a message and finish with "*I consider this topic closed. If anyone has anything else to add please call me or come see me.*"
2. **Tell them what you want.** At least 50% of the email I received every day required me to take some action, yet initially I had to read through the entire body to discover what was needed. So I asked my team to highlight what I needed to do in the subject line and first few lines of the email. This caused a massive increase in my productivity as it cuts down on misunderstandings and rework. Simply following this one principle can reduce your email time by 20%.
3. **Make the subject meaningful.** Just because you receive an email with a title such as "*Customer Problem*", "*For Approval*" or "*Reference Needed*" does not mean that when you forward or reply to the message you need to continue this sloppy habit. As an added benefit, these messages will be much easier to find when the inevitable *CYA* situation arises six months later.

Old Subject Line	New Subject Line
Customer Problem	Fw: Customer Problem : Missing Shipment on 8/28 for Acme Rocketskates
For Approval	Fw: For Approval >> Vacation Request for Sara 8/13-8/17
Reference Needed	Re: Reference Needed: >\$250m biotech company on current release

4. **Make your boss more efficient.** Assume that your direct supervisor is even busier than you are, and if you can save her from thinking too hard it will reflect well upon you. So try phrases like "*Julie - please read through point #3 below and reply with your approval or any questions by Thursday*". 95% of bosses will love this, and for the other 5% it gives you an opening to find out exactly what they do want. Once again, less room for misunderstandings and fewer last minute panics and reworks.
5. **Monitor the email groups you belong to.** Otherwise you can be flooded with miscellanea from the marketing, sales or support departments, as well as knowing precisely how many drivers have left their lights on in the parking lot or that there are spare doughnuts available in conference room F.

There are many ideas contained in this document. Some of them may not be practical for you to implement within your corporate environment. I can guarantee you that if you only check your email once an hour, implement a filing system and tell people what actions you need them to take - you will suddenly have a lot more time on your hands. Because you really aren't being paid to read 200 emails a day!

This document was authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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