Managing Email Effectively
Your 10-Minute Guide to Taming Your Inbox

Email can be incredibly useful – or it can be a huge distraction. The strategies in this guide will help you and your people process email effectively, so that you can all be more productive.

Email has transformed the business world. When you use it effectively, you can share information quickly, and increase your productivity as a result. But, email can easily become overwhelming if you don’t manage it carefully.

In this 10-Minute Guide, we’ll outline six simple ways that you and your team can manage your email more effectively, so you can get on with the work you’re trying to do.
So, what are these six ways of managing your email better?

1. Check Your Email at Set Times

If you check your email constantly, you disrupt your train of thought, and you become less productive.

So, instead of checking your inbox throughout the day, choose set times that you’ll check your mail – for example, first thing in the morning, after lunch, and at the end of the day.

Alternatively, schedule time to read and respond to emails after a long period of focused work, or at the time of day when your energy and creativity are at their lowest (so that you can do high value work at other times).

You may be able to set up your email software to receive email at certain times only. But, if not, turn off alerts (including those on your smartphone or tablet), or, log out of your email program completely, so that you’re not tempted to look at it outside your allocated times.

Manage colleagues’ expectations, and let them know that you only check your email at set times. If there are situations in which they need to contact you urgently, suggest that they call, or use instant messaging.

2. Use the "Two-Minute Rule"

You can waste hours if you don’t use your email reading time intelligently.

Apply time management expert David Allen’s “Two-Minute Rule” to your email. Allen suggests that you should assess your tasks (including your email) as you come across them, and immediately do any that will take less than two minutes to complete.

For more complex emails, schedule time on your calendar, add them as actions on your To-Do List, or use your email system to flag them up as messages that you’ll need to respond to.

3. Manage Informational Messages Proactively

Many of us get lots of informational notifications – such as “FYI” emails from the corporate office, or details of updated procedures.

If you see your name in the “CC” field instead of the “To” field of a message, chances are it’s an informational message. Consider filing it in a “To Read” folder, so that you can tackle it when you have time.

You may even be able to set up a filter or a rule (see below) in your email program to file these emails in a specific folder that you can access when you have spare time.

4. Use Email Folders

A simple filing system will help you find information quickly, and act on it.

You could use broad categories such as “Action Items,” “Waiting,” and “Reference.” You can then use your “Action” and “Waiting” folders as informal To-Do Lists.

If three categories sounds too simplistic, you can set up folders for each of your projects or clients. Then, instead of scouring your entire email system, you can simply search in the relevant folder and find the relevant emails quickly and easily. (Whether this works for you depends on the type of work you do.

If you need instant access to emails, use folders. If you can spend a bit of time searching for an email, then an email search engine can give you everything you need.)

5. Use Rules

Most email programs allow you to establish “rules” that sort email into a particular folder as soon as it comes in.

For instance, you might get several emails each day that notify you of sales your company has made. You want to receive these, because you want to know what’s happening, but you don’t want them to clutter your inbox.

So, instead, set up a rule that moves every email with the subject header “sales notification” into a dedicated “sales notifications” folder as soon as it arrives. You can then browse these at a convenient time. You’ll also store all of these emails in one place, which can help you spot trends in the information that they contain.
6. **Agree How to Use Email**

If email is the main communication channel with your team, then it’s likely that your inbox is full of ongoing conversations about team projects and issues. These can be distracting, and these messages can make it difficult to manage the other contents of your inbox. Agree some simple rules with your people, so that you can all manage your email more effectively:

- If a message is short, suggest that it’s fine to type it straight into the subject line of the email and add “EOM” (End of Message) at the end. You’ll all be able to see the message quickly, act on it, and then delete it without having to open the email.
- Include deadlines in email subject headers. People can use these to prioritize tasks quickly, and to file them once a deadline has passed.
- If your team members regularly send similar emails, such as timesheets or expense forms, ask them to use agreed keywords in their email subject lines, so that you can filter these emails into folders, and tackle them in a batch.
- You can manage email volume by using the “To” and “CC” fields intelligently. Only include someone’s email address in the “To” field if you expect a reply from them, and use the “CC” field for people you’re simply keeping updated.
- Likewise, think about who needs to be kept in the loop before you press “reply all.” You don’t always need to reply to everyone included in a message.
- If it’s appropriate in your organization, switch on your “out of office” message when you need some email-free time. Provide a cell phone number or VoIP/IM username in your message that people can use if they need to reach you urgently, and state when you’ll next be reading your emails.

**Key Points**

Most of us feel overwhelmed by email at some point. However, when you manage it effectively, you can significantly reduce stress and boost your productivity.

To gain control of your inbox, start by checking and processing email only at certain times during the day. If you’re concerned about the delayed response, let people know that you don’t check your email constantly.

Aim to keep your inbox as clear as possible. Organize mail using folders, and, when you do check mail, use the two-minute rule – immediately handle any email that you can read and respond to in two minutes or less.

Agree simple rules within your team so that you can reduce the number of messages sent, and make them easier to handle.

You can learn many other business communication skills at [www.mindtools.com/rs/Comms](http://www.mindtools.com/rs/Comms).