

## Management Article -- Taming Your Inbox: 7 Tips to More Efficient Use of E-mail August 2009

E-mail can be a remarkable tool that boosts productivity or it can be a huge time waster. Mostly how well email works depends upon how skilled you are at effectively managing it. I would like to share some of the tips and tricks that have helped me manage the hundreds of e-mails that I get every day.

- **Handle it once if possible:** When looking over e-mail, I have a goal of getting it handled with one touch. It saves time to respond, delete, forward, or move an e-mail to a relevant folder in one touch.
- **Leave unresolved e-mails in your inbox:** It's hard to overlook an email issue that I am working on if I am diligent in handling my incoming e-mail and leave a few pending emails in an otherwise clean inbox. Keeping your inbox clean will help you find things and lower stress level. Leaving the pending issues in your box, rather than a folder on the desktop, makes it less likely you will overlook an issue.
- **Fretting about how to get started when you've got hundreds (or thousands) of emails in your in box?** It's simple. Just create a new folder called "old in box before [date]". Move them to that folder. Now use your new set of folders beginning with the next email received, and touch it once. If you get time, go back and sort those old ones, but chances are you won't need many of them. But they will be there if you do.
- **Set up a sensible system of folders:** For most people, the number of folders should not go beyond one or two dozen. Sub folders can help keep things organized while minimizing clutter. Create a main theme that uses a good decision rule for folders. It's difficult to manage when some of your folders are named for dates, while others are named for people. People emails can go to both people and dates, so it's confusing. When designing your folders, consider a theme, then check it by going to your most recent received emails, say the last few weeks. Scan them, writing down the folder name that they would have gone into under that theme. With a few weeks of emails reviewed, you will have 80% of the folders you'll ever need. Create them and use them going forward.
- **Set aside particular times for dealing with email:** Some people feel compelled to constantly check their email or respond every time they hear the ping of an incoming e-mail. Turn off e-mail notification and reserve time twice a day to do e-mails. Constant checking is a huge drain on productivity.
- **Write good subject lines:** It is a time waster to get an e-mail from an employee with a subject line that does not clearly communicate the contents. Here are two bad subject lines: **Meeting, Issue to Resolve**. Make certain that your people

know how to write good subject lines: **Meeting with Tom Jacobs Rescheduled to 2 pm, Truck Repair estimate 2k more than expected.**

- **Recognize the limits of e-mail** – E-mail is a very poor way to discuss an issue when a decision needs to be made. Most e-mail discussions wander off topic. E-mail is also a poor way to build rapport

By applying these tips, you can make yourself a better user of email..

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