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Email Hacks: How to Manage Your Inbox in 2021

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Everyone handles their email inbox differently. Some people have to clear every unread message out at the end of each day, while others let their unread email notifications pile up until there's no going back. But one thing is for certain, our inboxes today are significantly more overwhelming than they were even just a few years ago.

Before we jump into email management and everything therein, we are going to take a moment to talk about a psychological philosophy called Flow. Essentially, Flow is a state of mind in which a person becomes fully immersed in an activity. While this is a mental state, it is deeply influenced by psychological, environmental, creative, and social responses.

Your chances of reaching this Flow state are greater when you can first focus on single tasks, as opposed to jumping back and forth between activities. Additionally, having clear goals and immediate feedback play into your ability to reach Flow.

Now you may be asking why we are bringing this up now when we're supposed to be talking about emails. And we will tell you... Emails are huge disrupters to our Flow state because each email we receive acts as a distraction from our current task. Not only are we interrupted to either respond or read the email, but we are given yet one more thing to focus on. Emails are inevitable. They are a great means to communicate, but if unmanaged, they can quickly spin out of control.

Now that you have a brief background on Flow, everything we discuss moving forward is to help you achieve this level of clarity and productivity through your inbox.

To kick this off, let's look at some numbers. Did you know that the average office worker receives around [121 emails](#) every workday? Roughly 2.5 hours a day are spent on email, which adds up to about 30% of your workweek! That is insane... Nowhere in your job description does it say you have to spend 30% of your time on email, but this is where we are today.

Three things are significantly impacted by our time spent on email: our mood, our focus, and our to-do list. These three things are both negatively and positively impacted by not only the quantity of virtual mail we receive in a day but the quality as well.

The Science Behind Attention

For the past few decades, a lot of studies and work have gone into the science of attention. And because our inbox holds so much of our attention during the day, there are many parallels that can be drawn between our inbox and our psychological response to how we interact with that inbox. Part of why so much of our time is devoted to checking and looking at our email can be attributed to what science calls the Fixed reward vs. the Variable reward system.

Hear us out, this is interesting...

In 1948, a behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner studied what he coined “schedules of reinforcement.” At the time, what Skinner was studying was the relationship between actions (in his case, a hungry rat pressing a lever in a so-called Skinner box) and their associated rewards (pellets of food). During this study, Skinner distinguished between fixed-ratio schedules of reinforcement and variable-ratio schedules of reinforcement. Under a fixed schedule, a rat received a reward of food after it pressed the lever a fixed number of times — say 20 times. Under the variable schedule, the rat earned the food pellet after it pressed the lever a random number of times. So for example, if the rat pressed the lever 5 times he would get a reward, and sometimes it would take pressing the lever 150 times to get the reward.

Obviously, the predominant difference between the two schedules of reinforcement was this aspect of predictability. Prior to the conclusion of the study, one might expect that the fixed schedules of reinforcement would be more motivating and rewarding because the rat can learn to predict the outcome of his work. Instead, what Skinner found was that the variable schedules were actually more motivating. The most telling result was that when the rewards ceased, the rats that were under the fixed schedules stopped working almost immediately, but those under the variable schedules kept working for a considerable time longer.

So, what do food pellets have to do with e-mail? If you think about it, e-mail is very much like trying to get the pellet rewards. Most of it is junk and the equivalent of pulling the lever and getting nothing in return, but every so often we receive a message that we really want. Maybe it contains good news, some watercooler talk, a note from someone we haven’t heard from in a long time, or maybe just an important piece of information. We are so happy to receive the unexpected e-mail (pellet) that we become addicted to checking, hoping for more such surprises. We just keep pressing that lever, over and over again, until we get our reward. See where we are going?

We are feeling science-y today, so along the lines of this psychological response also comes what is called completion bias. By spending a third of our time on email, it feels like we are being productive, after all, it is our “work-inbox.” Unfortunately, this isn’t really the case. We convince ourselves that we are being productive by checking this work-inbox but really we aren’t producing anything at all, instead, we are being reactive- responding to the needs of whatever the senders are requesting of you. As a result, we spend a tremendous amount of time on short-term priorities that get in the way of completing the bigger tasks on our lists. All of this has resulted in one thing: multitasking. As professionals, we have gotten good at multitasking, which if you think about it, is somewhat of an oxymoron because no one is truly good at multitasking.

Research shows that when we are deeply engrossed in an activity, even minor distractions, like an email, can have a profound effect. According to a University of [California-Irvine study](#), regaining our initial momentum following an interruption can take, on average, upwards of 20 minutes! And that’s after only one interruption... you get where are going with this.

The Three Email Rules

1. Email is like Tetris

No matter how good you are at playing Tetris, blocks will continue to come, and they will speed up over time. No one has ever won a game of Tetris, and email is the same way, no matter how good you are at clearing the messages, they will not only continue to come, but they will also increase in frequency year after year.

The Solution: You have to change your mindset. You have to use the right tools to be able to consistently keep your emails at a manageable level and you have to set limits and boundaries around when you choose to interact and not interact with your inbox.

2. Email is not the default priority

For way too many of us, email has become this default, number 1 priority. You wake up and check your inbox. You get to the office and check your inbox. And the problem with this is that your email acts as a to-do list that other people add to. So what happens is other people’s priorities become your own.

The Solution: Scan your inbox for important and or otherwise urgent emails, then close your inbox.

You can do this first thing in the morning, or really any time you want, but the key is to scan and then get out. Next, block a 30-60 minute appointment slot every day for “email time.” This is time you designate to spend in your inbox because you say so, not because someone else is requesting something from you. Now depending on the number of emails you receive every day, that time can fluctuate, but the point is that you are setting the time, it shouldn’t be dictated by anyone else. When you get sucked into your inbox, take a minute and ask yourself, is this the best use of your time? Most of the time, it isn’t, so give yourself that moment to decide for yourself.

3. Not all emails are created equal

Each email commands the same real estate in your inbox, whether it is from the CEO or spam. There are really three types of emails, the unimportant noise, the important and urgent emails, and the important but not urgent emails.

The Solution: Delete and archive all the noise in bulk, handle the important and urgent emails in the moment, and then defer the important but non-urgent emails to your designated email time.

Reaching Inbox Zero

Inbox zero is a method for continually getting to zero emails in your inbox every day. How you can do this is by categorizing your emails into five action buckets.

- Delete/archive
- Defer
- Delegate
- Respond
- Do

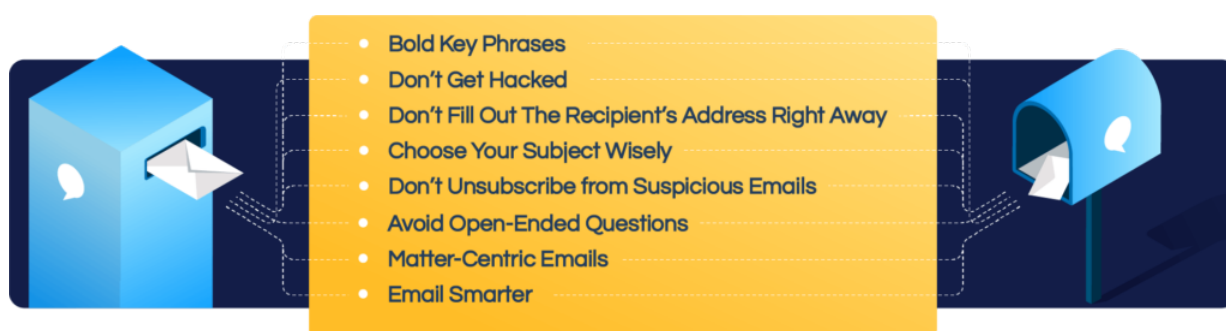
All the noise: newsletters, updates, weekly emails, should be deleted in bulk. You should be giving very minimal time to these emails. The quick fix emails, emails that can be taken care of in 2 minutes or less, can fall into the three middle categories of deferring, delegate, and responding.

When you defer, that simply means moving it out of your inbox into a separate folder. You can create a folder, whether you call it a deferred folder or your snoozed folder, the idea is to just move emails out of your main inbox. Delegating an email(s) simply means you’re forwarding it to someone else on your team who is more suited to answer the specific question or request, and to

respond, is well, you respond.

The last bucket, “Do,” are the emails that require more of your time and attention. They are emails that need work or are related to various projects you have on your plate. These are the emails that should be remaining in your inbox that should be worked on throughout your day until a resolution is met. You can prioritize them further by flagging or starring them to ensure they don’t get overlooked.

Email Hacks



Bold Key Phrases

If your email is on the longer side, highlight keywords or sentences in bold. This will make your reader’s job easier and you’ll be a more efficient communicator. It is important here to not bold too much and don’t use all caps because people associate that with yelling.

Don’t Get Hacked

You deal with more sensitive information than most professional people do. Because of this, the legal industry is hit with a lot of [security breaches](#) that leave lasting impacts on not only your clients but your firm.

If you’re using the same password for multiple online services, if one of those services gets hacked, that means there’s a good chance that all of them have been compromised. The solution to this is to use individual passwords that are not associated with anything in your day-to-day life. And we know that can be tough to keep up with, so utilize services like 1Password to help you create and then store all your passwords for each of your accounts.

Don't Fill Out The Recipient's Address Right Away

Mistakes happen! Wrong email addresses can be attached, misspelled names or titles, etc. Give yourself a chance to proof-read the email prior to hitting that send button. Every email interface typically works from the top-down. You fill out the recipient, then the subject, message, and any related attachments. Instead of working this way, try the reverse. Add your attachments first, then write your message, fill in your subject line, and then once all of this is complete add your recipient(s). Doing this will help mitigate some of those human errors that we are all prone to make!

Choose Your Subject Wisely

Putting a call to action in your subject line will not only get your email read faster, but there is a greater chance the recipient will interact with it. Additionally, the more specific your subject line is, the easier it will be to search for it later on.

Don't Unsubscribe from Suspicious Emails

Often times, it becomes a reflex to unsubscribe from emails that are either spam or considered irrelevant and otherwise unnecessary for you to be receiving. What happens if you unsubscribe from senders with compromised integrity, is you've exposed yourself as 1. Being human, and 2. A human who cares about their inbox. This is a spammer's best-case scenario. Instead, either move these to a designated spam folder or bulk delete them.

Avoid Open-Ended Questions

Email is a great medium for close-ended questions, not open-ended ones. Emails ending with, "Thoughts?" Is a strong signal that that email should either be a phone conversation or even an in-person one. Knowing what is appropriate to send via email and what is not will save you time during your day and will keep those email distractions to a minimum. Conversely, email is great for unambiguous communication, where decisive answers or choices can be made.

Matter-Centric Emails

If you're working with a practice management software, some platforms will let you save emails

directly to matters from Microsoft Outlook, or let you find emails based on any email property including subject, sent/received date, or email content. With the ability to connect your email correspondence directly to the appropriate matter, you are keeping all your communications matter centric. Having all your communication related to particular matters in one place helps keep your team efficient, in sync, and organized.

Email Smarter

Sometimes it is easy to forget that emails constitute billable time. If you are working, responding, and communicating with your clients, you should be getting paid for that. Technology is advanced enough today to allow you to automatically create a billing entry every time you send an email to your client or create billing entries from your inbox as you're reviewing emails. Not every software allows you to do this, but the technology is available and with reason- it will help you make and collect the money you deserve!

The Takeaway

Email Zen to Optimize Our Flow State

Phase 1: The Declutter Phase

Creating folders that are labeled for old mail and dragging everything into those folders on a regular basis. Train unwanted emails to go into that folder and if you have time, delete those old emails and make sure relevant emails correspond to the matters they relate to. Delegate emails when necessary and don't get distracted with the longer, more project-based requests.

Phase 2: The Organization Phase

This is where you figure out how much time you're going to give yourself and set limits and boundaries on how much time you are willing and able to spend going through your inbox. Avoid mindlessly checking your email when you're not in a dedicated place to respond or think about next steps. The best way to fall behind with your inbox is to start checking your email while you're in line at a grocery store, get distracted by the cashier, and then completely forget about that email entirely. So stop doing that! Set numeric goals of how many emails you want left in your inbox at

the end of the day. Inbox zero may not always be possible for everyone, so set goals to keep you on track and accountable.

Phase 3: Email Zen and Flow Phase

You now have a clear set of rules to follow, you don't leave your email open, you don't get distracted with emails outside of your designated email time, and you're able to put more focused time back into your day for billable activities.

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