STOP CHECKING EMAIL

STEP 2

How to Clear Your Inbox

KEY POINTS

- Your inbox **is not** your task list
- If a message takes less than two minutes to act on, **act now**
- If a message takes longer, **place it on your task list**
- **Never leave messages** you've already read in your inbox

4.1 ★ YOUR INBOX IS NOT A TASK LIST

Do you walk outside, open your physical mailbox, leaf through last year's mail, find a message to look at, take it out of the envelope, read it, put it back in the envelope, and then return it to the mailbox?

> Your inbox is really no different than your physical mailbox.
> You probably throw out junk mail right away, place your bills in some sort of bills-to-pay pile, and toss a magazine where you're likely to read it later. The same should go for email.

Then why would you do that with your email inbox?

The inbox is where items arrive for your examination. You need to act upon some of them today and some weeks from now; some you may hold onto for reference and some you may discard immediately. With such a potpourri of items, your inbox serves as a very inefficient task list.

With an inbox of hundreds or thousands of items, you can't really tell:

- What's important
- What's due
- What's been (sufficiently) read

Your inbox is really no different than your physical mailbox. You probably throw out junk mail right away, place your bills in some sort of bills-to-pay pile, and toss a magazine where you're likely to read it later. The same should go for email.

Points from emails that you'll deal with later belong on a task list, so that those emails can be safely removed from your inbox. **If you don't have a task list, you need to get one. A piece of paper will suffice for getting started.**

4.2 ★ BATCHING: HOW NOT TO CHECK YOUR EMAIL

In the last section you learned how batching works. That means two things when applied to email:

> Experience an empty inbox as soon as possible since it'll be part of the motivation to help you succeed

- You need to check your email far less often; preferably once or twice per day. If you're worried about missing something time-sensitive, using AwayFind can help to notify you about anything truly urgent
- When you do check your email, you need to go through all of it

The rest of this section describes how to process your email the few times per day that you check it.

4.3 ★ CLEARING YOUR INBOX

Okay, so let's assume you've committed the next thirty minutes to clearing your inbox. Great!

Here's what to do to before you process your email:

★ Sort or filter your emails *by Subject* and then *Sender* to find email conversation threads. (Or in Gmail, this happens automatically, and in Outlook there's a "Group By Conversations" option). Then examine the messages that are part of a conversation to determine what is left for you to do with them. By looking through these at the outset, you'll often find that an issue has resolved itself by the time you're reading about it, and thus you can ignore the whole bunch of related messages

EMAIL

Less Than 2 Min? → Greater Than 2 Min? → Someone Else? → Not Relevant?

Take Action

Assign Action Item to Task List

Delegate, Assign Follow-up to Task List

ARCHIVE or DELETE

* Now that the redundant messages are out of the way, process your email from oldest to newest—this way, if you have to stop you've addressed the priorities that have been waiting the longest

* Going one message at a time, this is how you empty your inbox:
  - *If a message takes less than two minutes to act on*, **act now** and then **archive it** or **delete it**
  - *If a message takes longer than two minutes to act on*, **place its actionable items on your task list** and **archive it** or **delete it**
  - *If a message is for someone else who you manage*, **delegate it and place a note to follow-up on your task list**, and then **archive the message** or **delete it**
  - *If a message is not relevant* and will likely never be relevant, **delete it**

4.4 ★ A QUICK FILING TIP: USE ONE FOLDER

If you use Outlook 2007, Gmail, Postbox, or Mail, filing is a piece of cake: **you only need one folder**. Anything that you're done with from your inbox should just go there. Full text search has gotten so much faster and more reliable...so you don't need to separate things by categories, projects, or clients.

- File in one folder
- Search for the message (for text in the From, Subject, Body). Don't hunt for it.

Give it a shot. Fewer folders will make filing and retrieving messages both smoother and faster.

> You'll feel much better making it through a small task list than checking two items off a giant one. You're also more likely to pay attention to your list if it's a manageable size

4.5 ★ WHAT IF YOU ALREADY HAVE THOUSANDS OF EMAILS IN YOUR INBOX?

A common barrier to getting started with emptying your inbox can be the hundreds or thousands of messages that have already accumulated there. Here's how to address this:

i. Create a new folder (or "Label" if you're in Gmail) called "Email To Process"

ii. Move all the messages that arrived before this week into that folder

iii. For the next few weeks, spend 15 minutes each day processing these messages (with the same steps as above), starting from the oldest messages. (Also, continue to process your inbox each day.)

You might think that you could keep all these messages in your inbox until they've been processed, but one thing you'll recognize very quickly is the psychological relief you feel when your inbox is empty. I want you to experience an empty inbox as soon as possible since it'll be part of the motivation to help you succeed.

4.6 ★ WHAT IF YOU'VE NEVER SUCCEEDED WITH A TASK LIST BEFORE?

Maintaining a list of tasks is easier said than done. There are as many approaches to task lists as there are people who use them. Here are a few tips for keeping a task list, which may help you to succeed with processing your email:

★ Provide enough detail on each task to make it easy for you to complete it later (When you start a task, if there's a bunch of information you have to find before you can move forward, then you're more likely to procrastinate. You want to do what you can when creating the task to prevent that).

- Bad Example: "Call Paul to discuss proposal."
- Good example: "Call Paul Singh to discuss Results Junkies eBook (attached)"

★ For any given day, try to keep your task list very small (perhaps one or two major items and a few phone calls or errands). You'll feel much better making it through a small task list than checking two items off a giant one. You're also more likely to pay attention to your list if it's a manageable size.

⋆ If possible, maintain a list that's date specific so that you don't need to pay attention to a particular task until its start date arrives (Outlook 2007's calendar Tasks are excellent for this, as is www.gootodo.com).

⋆ Do not use your calendar as a task list. Do use your calendar to block out time for specific tasks or groups of tasks, when helpful.

> **note:** For extensive discussions on using a paper to-do list, try http://snipr.com/notwwd [Web Worker Daily] or http://todoodlist.com/ ($).
> Many more resources (such as the *Getting Things Done* book) and more to-do applications are mentioned in the Resources section at the end of this eBook.

The rest of this guide (including research, tweaks for social networking sites, and free tools) is available at:

notcheckingemail.com