

# CLEAN OUT YOUR E-MAIL INBOX – AND KEEP IT THAT WAY

Most people use e-mail all day every day, and they allow their Inbox to become so full it is ineffective. The only way an e-mail will ever get out of your life (and off your mind) is to either deal with it or get rid of it.

**If it is more than a week or two old, either answer it or delete it now.** If you feel you have to keep it, you should have folders to transfer into so your Inbox contains only new and very recent e-mails. *(You can create a new folder by going to the Toolbar, click on 'File', either 'New' or 'Folder', choose 'New Folder', give it a name, and you're done. Then you just highlight the e-mail(s) you want to move, use your cursor to drag them over to the new folder, and release the mouse when the folder is highlighted).* Here are some folder ideas:

- Name of Project: All e-mails relating to a specific project so you can easily track progress
- Person's Name: E-mails from your boss, partner, client – anyone with whom you want a history of your correspondence
- Professional Organizations: Their newsletters, flyers, or announcements you want to refer to but do not have to take any action
- Archive: Save for future reference

**JUMPSTART:** *If you just can't delete e-mails, highlight all that are older than 7-10 days. Drag them from your Inbox into a folder – you are drawing a line in the sand. You still have the old messages, but you can now implement your new Inbox strategies immediately.*

Just remember that every e-mail you read, re-read, and re-re-re-re-read as it sits in that big pile is actually incurring mental debt. The interest you pay on e-mail you're reluctant to deal with is compounded every day and is what makes it so overwhelming to deal with your Inbox. If you're not going to do anything with a message, get it out of your sight and make room for the actionable items.

Other tactics:

**Shut off auto-check.** Turn off automatic checking (the sound, and those notice boxes that appear on the bottom right of your screen when new mail comes in). *Aha moment:* Auto-check means 60 potential distractions every hour, or almost 500 per day. Look back at a week of your e-mails and ask yourself: How much crucial, instantly actionable e-mail did I receive to make it worth shifting my attention over 2,000 times? *(While in your Inbox, go to Tools on your toolbar, Options, E-Mail Options, Advanced E-Mail Options. Uncheck all the boxes under 'When new items arrive in my Inbox'.)*

**Limit the number of times you check e-mail throughout the day.** Set a schedule to check e-mail once an hour and for just a few minutes. Then return to any processed mail throughout the day as time allows to quickly respond to it. Stop thinking of e-mails like precious family heirlooms and start treating them like perishable milk that becomes a little less fresh every day. There will always be more e-mails.

**Take care of easy ones right away.** If you can retire an e-mail with a 1-2 line response (< 2 minutes, preferably 30 seconds), do it now. Get it off your plate, and get back to work.

**Be concise.** Your e-mails are not epic literature. Reply with answers, decisions, or action items; refrain from making long commentaries.