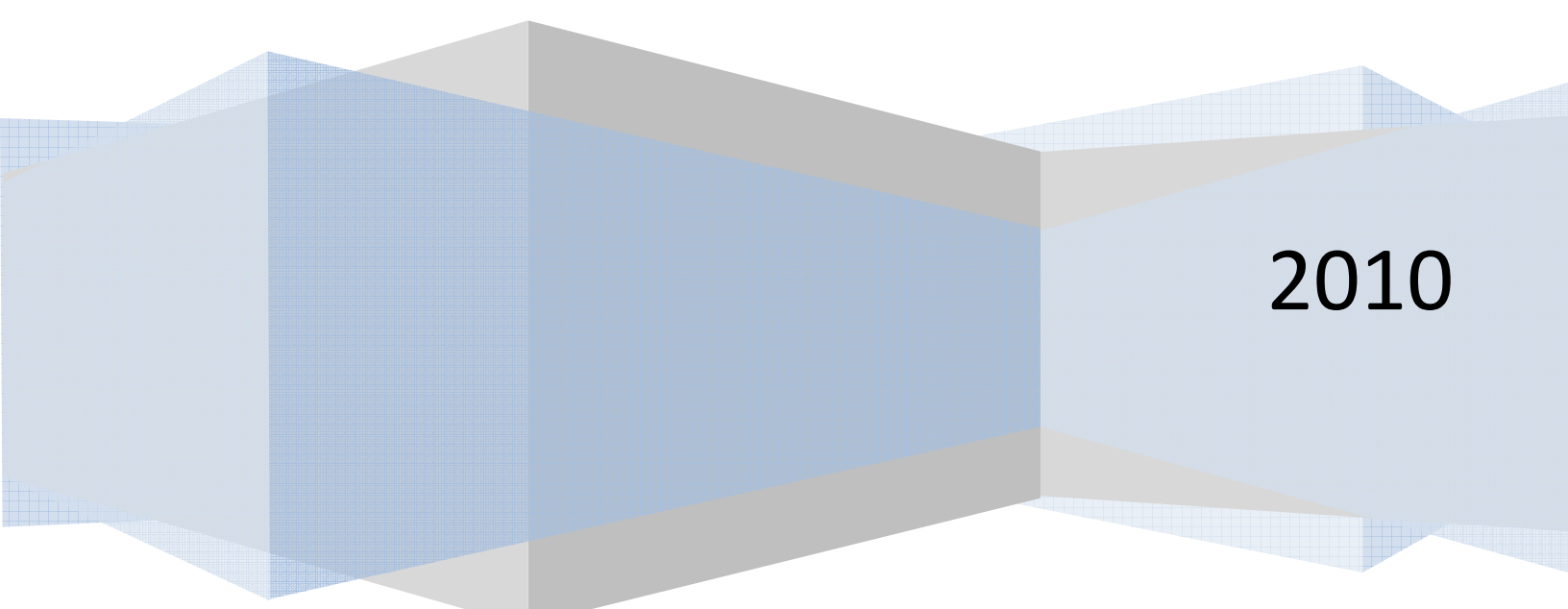


realign, llc

# Conquer Email Overload:

Regain Control of Your Inbox in 5 (Relatively) Easy Steps

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## Regain Control of Your Inbox in 5 (Relatively) Easy Steps

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Email is so much more than just another modern convenience; it has become an integral component of the way we work and live each day. It is a quick and easy way to share information and data with others. Also, a great deal of money is saved every year by communicating electronically rather than spending money on postage. However, the sheer volume and frequent misuse of email can make it distracting, time consuming and costly. According to Susan Feldman's "Hidden Costs of Information Work: A Progress Report", "Email consumes an average of 13 hours per week per information worker and is often intimately intertwined with document workflow, sales, scheduling, and other business processes. Assuming that an average knowledge worker makes \$75,000 per year, the time spent on reading and answering email costs a company \$20,990 per worker per year."<sup>1</sup>

As an organizer, one of the most frequent concerns I hear expressed by business owners and busy professionals is that they literally do not have time to keep up with all of the email that arrives in their inbox each day. Recently, I was meeting with a client who had just returned to the office after being out for a day and a half. She opened her inbox and almost shrieked. There were 236 unread messages! When the volume of incoming mail passes the point of easy manageability, knowledge workers risk losing data and failing to respond in a timely manner to inquiries from clients, prospects, etc. Simple and common mistakes such as these are a source of frustration and can make even the most conscientious worker appear unprofessional.

If you think that you are alone in dealing with email overload, consider these statistics quoted from [www.email-marketing-reports.com](http://www.email-marketing-reports.com):

- 247 billion emails are sent each day. That's one email every 0.00000035 seconds.
- In the time it takes you to read this sentence, some 20 million emails entered cyberspace.
- Every second, the world's email users produce messages equivalent in size to over 16,000 copies of the Complete Works of Shakespeare (assuming a 30KB average email size).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Feldman, Susan. Hidden Costs of Information Work: A Progress Report (IDC #217936), May 6, 2009

<sup>2</sup> [www.Email-Marketing-Messages.com](http://www.Email-Marketing-Messages.com); "8 Email Statistics to Use at Parties", August 8, 2009

At realign, we have developed a 5 step system to help our clients regain control of their email inbox. Due to our astounding originality, it follows the acronym "EMAIL":

- E** – Evaluate the current situation
- M** – Make the right folder structure to manage your electronic communications
- A** – Abolish junk mail
- I** – Inbox clean up
- L** – Leave nothing to chance – create a maintenance plan

### **Step 1 - Evaluate the current situation:**

If you are ready to take back control of the time you spend managing electronic communications, begin with the same process of development and initiation you would use for any professional project. Evaluating the current state of your email is a critical step in determining the most effective way to fix it. Not all cases of email overload have the same root cause and, therefore, they also do not all share the same solution. In general, there are three primary root causes to email overload. Most knowledge workers are plagued by one or more of these issues on a regular basis:

- Incorrect folder structure
- Volume
- Delete-o-Phobia

Here are some basic guidelines for identifying the source of your email woes:

You might have an incorrect folder structure if:

1. The only email folder you have is titled "Inbox".
2. Your file tree is so detailed and specific that filing your emails would require several hours of uninterrupted time and focus.
3. The existing folders don't match the way you mentally manage your workflow. (This could be the result of folders that were never set up correctly or it could also be indicative of a recent change in your work.)

You might be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of your email if:

1. A quick review of your inbox feels a lot like walking through a shopping mall.
2. You telecommute or your profession relies heavily upon the use of email for communication.
3. Personal and professional emails have become intermingled.
4. A backlog of emails developed following an extended vacation, illness or other leave of absence.

You might have a case of Delete-o-Phobia if:

1. Your inbox is crowded with one-word messages like “thanks”, appointment confirmations and meeting announcements for past events.
2. “Out of sight, Out of mind” describes your approach to your workflow.
3. Your email inbox functions as a de facto task list.

After you have identified the source(s) of your email overload, it is much easier to select the best strategy for fixing the problem. Not every idea and suggestion contained in the EMAIL process will match your specific needs. Implement the ones that are helpful and apply to your situation. Feel free to pass the others along to a friend or colleague who may have different needs.

## **Step 2 - Make the right folder structure to manage your electronic communications:**

An incorrect folder structure means that you have too few, too many, or simply not the right categories of folders to manage the flow of your electronic communications. A simple rule of thumb is that most knowledge workers need five primary folders to adequately categorize their email. If you have more than seven, you have created a structure that works directly against your brain’s natural ability to manage data. According to Lauren Schenckman, “Countless psychological experiments have shown that, on average, the longest sequence a normal person can recall on the fly contains about seven items. This limit, which psychologists dubbed the “magical number seven” when they discovered it in the 1950s, is the typical capacity of what’s called the brain’s working memory.”<sup>3</sup>

The problem with having too few categories or primary folders is that you will not have a “parking place” for each type of communication that comes into your inbox. If a message cannot be deleted at the current time and there is no obvious folder in which to file it, the typical response is to leave it sitting in the inbox rather than stop and force your mind through the decision process.

There are two different types of problems related to having an excessive number of folders. First, it can be confusing and overwhelming to decide where to file each message and overly small categories tend to encourage retention of emails that have no future value. I often observe clients saving messages that could be deleted as if to justify the existence of a highly-detailed category. This is a time drain which creates the electronic version of piles of paper cluttering your office.

The other potential problem that can result from an overly detailed file tree is a traffic jam in the inbox. When filing an email requires multiple decision points and takes more than a few seconds, you will naturally defer cleaning out your inbox to some future date when you expect to have more time. Unfortunately, for most of us, that elusive date never actually arrives. An inbox is meant to function a lot like a yield sign. The messages pause there for a brief period of time while you assess the situation and make a decision about how to continue. When your inbox functions more like a parking lot than a yield sign, you end up sitting in a traffic jam.

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<sup>3</sup> Schenckman, Lauren, “In the Brain, Seven is a Magic Number: New Findings on Why You Have Trouble Remembering More Digits”, December 6, 2009

The trick to setting up exactly the folders you need (no more, no less) is determining the categories you use to mentally manage your workflow, and then creating email folders to mirror that structure. This won't look the same for everyone, but there are some commonalities. Almost every business owner or busy professional will need an "admin" folder. Other common "top 5" folders are "clients", "community involvement", "personal", "financial", "marketing" and "resources". Take the time you need to make your list. Remember, your list should not exceed 7 primary folders. (In my opinion, 5 is the ideal number.) As soon as you think your list is complete, glance through the messages currently sitting in your inbox and make sure that there is a category that fits each type of message. Don't worry about lumping too many messages into the same category. Subfolders and the search function are there for your use – so use them!

### **Step 3 - Abolish junk mail:**

Email marketing is big business. It is estimated that US companies invested \$13.4 billion in direct email marketing in 2009.<sup>4</sup> How many of those marketing emails appear in your inbox? Probably far too many! Consider this: If you receive 30 junk marketing emails each day and spend 30 seconds per email making the determination that it is junk and then deleting it, you spend 15 minutes per day dealing with unwanted email. This equals 1 hour and 15 minutes per week or 62.5 hours per year. That is equal to one and a half weeks of your time each year wasted by the simple act of shoving electronic junk out of your way – and that does not include the time lost while getting back on task after each of those interruptions!

The first, and most effective, step you can take is to ask your IT support provider to recommend the best spam filter to meet your needs. There is no better solution than stopping the problem before it ever reaches your inbox.

Other simple strategies that can help reduce the volume of unwanted email and the amount of time you invest in processing it include:

- Unsubscribe from newsletters from retail stores, nonprofits, etc. that you originally signed up for but no longer use the content.
- Encourage your staff and the community organizations in which you are involved to use restraint when deciding whom to cc on email messages. There is no incremental monetary cost associated with choosing to cc one person vs. 50 people on an email, but the cost in terms of the lost productivity of the other 49 people is significant.
- Deal with your email in predetermined blocks of time. Addressing messages one by one as they arrive can literally take hours of productive time out of your day. According to the research of Gloria Mark, a Professor in the Informatics Department at the University of California, Irvine, information workers take an average of 23 minutes and 15 seconds to resume their focus on a task following an interruption.<sup>5</sup> Although I have read many different statistics regarding the amount of time required to get back on task after an interruption based on the work of a variety

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<sup>4</sup> [www.Email-Marketing-Reports.com](http://www.Email-Marketing-Reports.com), "8 Email Statistics to Use at Parties", August 8, 2009

<sup>5</sup> Pattison, Kermit, ""Worker Interrupted: The Cost of Task Switching", Fast Company, July 28, 2008

of researchers, they all agree that the amount of productive time lost is far greater than simply the moments required to deal with the distraction.

- Be careful when choosing when and where to disclose your email address.

#### **Step 4 - Inbox clean up:**

Once you have determined 1) the root cause of your own personal challenges with electronic communications, 2) established a folder structure that mirrors your mental management strategy and 3) taken steps to limit the volume of unwanted mail, it is important to clean up any old messages that are cluttering your inbox. Starting each day with a clean slate (or at least a nearly empty inbox) helps promote a positive attitude and reduces the potential number of distractions standing in between you and your goals for the day.

There are many ways to approach this project. However, my favorite tool to help eliminate email clutter while practicing the habits and strategies necessary to maintain a streamlined inbox is a 15 minute “sprint”. The goal is to reduce the total number of messages as much as possible within the time constraint. Go after the “low hanging fruit”. This is not the appropriate time to deal with detailed questions or decisions regarding the fate of a particular item. Using the timer on your phone (or a regular kitchen timer), set a 15 minute time frame to work without interruptions. Before you begin, make a note of the total number of messages (read and unread) currently sitting in your inbox.

First, sort by sender. Scroll down the list and look for senders with a high volume of emails. Frequently, you will be able to delete entire blocks of emails from the same sender at one time – newsletters you do not read, conversations with a friend to schedule a time to meet for dinner, outdated appointment confirmations, etc.

After the easy deletions are out of the way, scroll through the list again and start filing the emails you need to keep in the new folder structure.

It is not unusual for people to retain large numbers of emails relating to a past conflict or a project that was frustrating or unsuccessful. It is almost as though holding onto all the communications pertaining to the situation preserves some hope for a different outcome. In reality, this only creates distractions and a wave of negative emotions each time you scroll past these emails. Unless there is a legitimate legal or business purpose requiring you to keep them, this is a great opportunity to practice your deleting skills.

In addition to a quick clean up of your inbox, this process also serves as a “quality check” on your new folder structure. If a large number of messages cannot be deleted and do not have an obvious “home” in your new folder structure, the new system is incomplete and must be adapted to better meet your needs.

When the timer goes off, stop working and jot down the total number of emails remaining in your inbox. Look back at the starting number and calculate the percentage decrease. I think you will be pleasantly surprised. When I work through this process at clients’ offices, it is not unusual to achieve a

50% or greater decrease. I have even had two clients completely empty their inboxes during our organizing session.

If you were unable to reach a total inbox size that is acceptable to you, pull out your calendar and schedule 15 minutes tomorrow to repeat the “sprint”. Each time, you will get faster and more confident at making the decision to file, delete, or schedule an action.

Sometimes busy people start to use their email inbox as a task list. If, in reviewing the messages sitting in your inbox, you found task reminders rather than reference items and quick communications, you will need to consider the best way to turn these emails into to-do’s. If you are using Microsoft Outlook, simply drag the messages to the task bar. Otherwise, you may need to jot the items down a written list or transfer them to another task management system such as ToodleDo.com (which has a very helpful iPhone app.)

### **Step 5 - Leave nothing to chance – create a maintenance plan:**

After investing a great deal of your valuable time and energy in organizing your email, you will want it to stay that way! However, without a maintenance plan in place, I can almost guarantee it will only be a few weeks before you start feeling overwhelmed and frustrated again by electronic communications.

Did you find a large number of newsletters in your inbox from which you were not ready to unsubscribe? If so, in Microsoft Outlook you can use the Rules & Alerts function to automatically file them in a specific folder to review at a convenient time. Before making the decision to save this information, consider how likely you are to really use it and if there is another place to get it if you do need it at some point in the future. There is rarely a need to build your own personal library.

Plan to commit 15 minutes a day to maintaining your inbox. It didn’t get out of control overnight, but you can keep it manageable with just a few minutes of effort each day.

Develop a quick list of questions that you run through in your mind as you process your email. Some suggested questions are:

- Why would I need to read this again?
- What would happen if I wanted to reread this message and it had been deleted?
- If I wanted to find this message 6 months from now, where would I look?
- Am I about to file the clutter I’ll have to clean up next year?
- Is there an action item associated with this email? If so, how will I capture it on my list?

There is one final “trick” I like to use to encourage clients to maintain their newly organized email system. It’s silly – but it works! I call it the “Email Pledge”. Decide on the total number of items you would be comfortable having in your inbox at the end of each workday. Most people I work with choose a number between 10 and 25. On a note card, jot down the sentence, “I, \_\_\_\_\_, do solemnly swear to leave no more than \_\_\_\_ emails in my inbox at the end of each day. Then sign and

date your oath. (To request a complimentary copy of our Email Pledge Certificate, please contact me via email or facebook.)

If you found this white paper beneficial and would like more information about how realign can help you get organized and take control of your administrative, financial and other back-office systems, please do not hesitate to contact me. Our strength and passion is helping you work more efficiently.

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When Back Office Details Are Holding You Back...