

The Three Primary Ways You Are Abusing Your E-mail Inbox

By Randy Dean, MBA

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As a time and productivity management speaker and author, I see it all the time. People just don't use their inboxes properly. And these mistakes lead to significant distraction, lost time, and rework. Most people use their e-mail inbox in four specific ways, and only one of those ways is correct:

1. **(The Correct Use): To Receive and Process New Messages.** The key reason you have an inbox is to receive new items in that inbox. Your goal is to quickly and efficiently figure out what those items are, and then properly process them. If you've ever attended one of my courses, you know that you handle the quick ones immediately, and you put the longer items on either your task list or your calendar, thus allowing you to plan and prioritize. After you either get them "done" or "tasked", you can either delete those messages or file them for later reference. And if you don't have a good place to file them, you make one and put it there. This is really the only way to use an inbox.
2. **As your de facto yet highly disorganized daily task list.** So many people use their e-mail inbox as their default task list. It isn't at all built for that. It is hard to prioritize individual items in an inbox, so you end up looking at the same items multiple times, trying to figure out which ones are important and/or urgent, and which ones aren't. Most tasking programs, including tools like MS Outlook, Toodledo, and Google Tasks, allow you to see your tasks in priority order by either date or by project (I teach courses on this!) Very quickly, you can figure out what is either most urgent or important. (Even a properly-designed paper task list can do this!) Thus, you can understand why I'm trying to get people out of the habit of "inbox tasking", and into the habit of building a smarter daily task list using an appropriate task tool each and every day.
3. **As your de facto yet highly disorganized general file box.** The other thing people are doing with their inbox is using it to store everything or nearly everything, with no consistent filing or organization strategy. Most people have made a few folders, but they rarely file everything they should in the folders they have already created. And they leave literally hundreds of e-mails, many that have already been attended to, just sitting in their inbox for no good reason. (The two big problems with leaving read e-mails in your inbox: 1) you'll likely read them again, even if you've already dealt with them – a pure form waste of time; 2) as you continue to add more and more e-mails into this inbox, you will lose more and more efficiency. You will "slog" to a halt.) How about this instead: Once that e-mail is "done", put it away. If you can't do it now, add it to your task list or calendar. Then, put it away (or delete it!) It isn't rocket science.
4. **Final mistake: checking that inbox far too often.** A recent study I read found that somewhere between 20-25% of working professionals check their e-mail 20 or more times per day! (That's every few minutes if you do the math!) How can you possibly maintain any productivity or focus when you are literally distracting yourself every few minutes? Studies have shown that incessantly checking your e-mail and other electronic inputs literally makes you stupid. You have to get off of

these "crazy trains", or you will literally lose YEARS of productivity through these abusive inbox activities.

Here's how:

1. When checking e-mail, process them the very first time you look at them. If they are something you can handle quickly, do them now. If not, add them to your calendar or task list. Make decisions from your calendar and task list – NOT your inbox.
2. Once you have that e-mail either done or tasked, file it if you might need it for later reference, or delete it. And if there is no good place to file it, MAKE ONE and put it there.
3. And stop checking e-mail so often! Get on some form of a regimen that balances your needs to be responsive with your needs to get things done.

This isn't rocket science, but it does require some discipline, some process management, and a few new habits. With these new habits, you can get off the e-mail "crazy train" and end your inbox abuse!

Randy Dean, MBA, The "Totally Obsessed" Time Management Technology Guy has been one of the most popular expert speakers on the conference, corporate, and university training and speaking circuit for several years. The author of the recent Amazon e-mail bestseller, *Taming the E-mail Beast*, Randy is a very popular and engaging time, e-mail, and technology management speaker and trainer. He brings 22 years of speaking and training experience to his programs, and has been very popular with programs including *Taming the E-mail Beast*, *Finding an Extra Hour Every Day*, *Optimizing Your Outlook*, *Time Management in "The Cloud" Using Google and Other Online Apps*, and *Smart Phone Success & Terrific Tablets*. Learn more at <http://www.randalldean.com>.

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