

Dealing with E-mail Overload

Overview

Tips for dealing with e-mail overload.

- Keeping business and personal e-mail separate
- Managing the time you spend on e-mail
- Tips on dealing with spam

You're not alone if your electronic inbox seems to be bursting at the seams. The average American worker spends at least two hours a day dealing with e-mail. And the number of e-mail messages sent over the Internet is rising dramatically -- by some estimates, by more than 20 percent a year. The length of messages is increasing too, largely because people are sending more attachments, especially attachments with images.

The best way to stay on top of your e-mail is to learn how to use your e-mail program to organize incoming mail and to have a plan for dealing with e-mail. This may include anything from making fewer printouts of e-mail messages to taking advantage of mail-sorting features in your software program.

Keeping business and personal e-mail separate

Keeping your business and personal e-mail separate is the first step toward gaining control of your inbox. Think of how much less productive you'd be if all your "snail mail" came to the office -- the bills, birthday cards, invitations, and magazine subscriptions you get at home. The same thing can happen with e-mail. You'll be less effective at work if you're continually distracted by messages unrelated to your job, and you may face serious consequences if you use your business e-mail address for personal correspondence.

The best way to keep business and personal e-mail separate is to have two e-mail accounts -- a work address that you use for business and a personal address that you use at home. A number of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) offer free accounts that are easy to set up. If you don't know how to do this, you can get help from a staff member at any public library with Internet access. You may also want to set up a third account to use when you log into commercial sites (for example, when shopping online). This will help to keep your inboxes free of unwanted messages from retailers.

Managing the time you spend on e-mail

One key to keeping your inbox under control is setting limits on the time you spend on e-mail. Here are some tips:

- *Limit the number of times a day you check your e-mail.* In many jobs you don't need to check your e-mail more than two or three times a day -- first thing in the morning, after lunch, and before you leave for the day. Turn off the

incoming e-mail bell or voice signal so you're not tempted to check new messages.

- *Make printouts only of e-mail that requires it.* Routinely making and filing printouts of e-mails can be time-consuming and unnecessary, and searching for an electronic file is generally quicker than looking for a piece of paper in a folder.
- *Use personalized form responses if you answer the same questions over and over.* Cut-and-paste form responses into your message and personalize each as needed, instead of composing every answer from scratch.
- *Remember that you don't have to respond to every message.* This is particularly true of one-word messages such as "Thanks" or "OK." Study the responses of more experienced co-workers if you aren't sure which messages need answers, and show consideration for others by not expecting them to give you a response to messages that don't require one. Many software programs let you mark routine messages with, "No response necessary."
- *Take advantage of the time-saving features on your e-mail software program.* Set up user groups that let you send messages to more than one person with one or two keystrokes. Add an automatic signature to the end of each e-mail with your name, title, address, and phone and fax number. Set up your e-mail program so that it transfers incoming mail automatically to certain files or folders. Or have it display your mail by category, instead of by time of arrival. Most e-mail programs also have many other organizational tools that can save time.
- *Clear your inbox of all messages regularly.* Some experts recommend that you empty your inbox completely every 24 or 48 hours. If this isn't practical, you might aim to clear it out at least once a week. Keeping old messages in your inbox creates clutter and can make it harder to spot urgent incoming mail.
- *Consider whether e-mail is the most effective way to deliver your message.* A phone call or trip down the hall may be more effective, particularly if your message is sensitive. As a rule, the more sensitive your message is, the more you benefit from having a face-to-face conversation, or at least speaking by phone.

Tips on dealing with spam

The average computer user gets nearly 4,000 pieces of spam, or electronic junk mail, each year. In addition to being distracting, these messages may carry dangerous computer viruses. Taking a few precautions can help to keep an electronic nuisance from turning into a serious problem for you and others in your company.

- *Limit your exposure to spam.* Avoid giving out your e-mail address unnecessarily (such as when you respond to e-mail chain letters). And always use a personal, not work, address when visiting commercial sites that may generate spam.
- *Use filters.* Filters are one of the most effective tools against spam. Many companies have corporate filters that block certain kinds of e-mail at the server to keep it from reaching individual users, such as mail that might be pornographic. You may be able to filter out most spam on your home computer by adjusting the controls or preferences offered by your Internet Service Provider. Check with your service provider if you aren't sure how to do this. Most computer stores also sell filtering software that offers a wide range of filtering options.
- *Talk to others at your company if you still have problems.* Depending on the problem, you may want to talk to your manager, a co-worker, or your systems or technical support department. Remember that spam can be a sign that your company-wide filters aren't working. This can be a warning bell for your employer's information technology department, so you'll want to alert IT staff members quickly to any potential problems.