

Take Charge of Your Email

by K.J. McCorry, May/June 2008 issue



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Illustration by Junko Shimizu

The compelling feeling that you have to stop what you're doing and read incoming e-mails as soon as they arrive can translate into a huge waste of time. If you let your e-mail take over your entire day, it will. Answering and writing e-mail needs to be just one of your many priorities.

STICK TO A SCHEDULE

When you open and glance at e-mails but don't deal with the content immediately, you lose time by having to reread the messages and make decisions again. Designate blocks of time—ideally three or four times a day—for focusing on your e-mails. Like other important communication tasks, you should respond to an e-mail as soon as you read the message. When you can't, most programs have utilities to “flag” messages as high priority or needing further action.

THE THREE Rs: READ, RESPOND, REMOVE

After opening an e-mail message:

1. Read the message entirely.
2. Respond to the e-mail (if needed).
3. Remove the message from your in-box by deleting or filing it.

After the three Rs, your in-box should only contain items you haven't read or which require further action.

CREATE A FILE SYSTEM

Once an e-mail has been read and acted upon, move any messages you want to save from the in-box to an e-mail folder. Be wary of creating too many folders. Ideally, you should not have to scroll down to see your e-mail folders. If you do, consider sub-filing

under general categories. For example, create a folder called “Clients,” and then create sub-files beneath that header for specific clients by name.

DON'T PRINT

To avoid a paper pileup, refrain from printing e-mails. If you need to keep a message, save it in the appropriate e-mail folder for future access. Filing within an e-mail system saves you from having to file paper versions of the e-mails you print.

Your ultimate—and amazingly achievable—goal is to create an empty in-box.

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