

Resolution #1 – In 2012, my email system will support my efficiency and effectiveness, not rule me.

By Russell Greenwald

We are all striving to do things better, faster, and cheaper and it is the time of year when we make resolutions for self-improvement and to develop good habits. So, I thought it might be beneficial to review some tips to help you manage your email inbox to improve your efficiency and effectiveness. And for those of you who are already effective at email management, this will provide a best practices refresher. Better email management will free up time for you to focus on your priorities and goals, which should fuel your success in 2012.

Become an Inbox Processing Machine

Treat your email inbox like your physical mailbox at home or the office. Do you leave your mail in the mailbox or do you take it inside the house, open it, sort it, and act on it? Do you leave birthday cards unopened, checks un-cashed, or bills unpaid? Probably not! You should apply these same practices to your email inbox.

Limiting Email Interruptions

Unless you staff a technology help desk or deal with extremely time sensitive matters, you should not check your email every minute of the day or every time you are alerted that an email has arrived. You should schedule time to check your email periodically throughout the day and you may want to turn off your email arrival notification. This limits interruptions and allows you to focus on projects, etc. that require thoughtful attention.

Attend to Easy Emails First

Every time you do check your email, act on the easy emails first. By easy, I mean emails that take no more than five seconds to process. Anything longer is not easy. Some examples of acting on them are: accepting or declining a calendar invite, giving authority to a request, acknowledging that you received a task request (then documenting the request in a task system), deleting junk email, forwarding email to relevant parties, or reading email and then archiving it.

What About Emails That Aren't "Easy"?

Emails that are not easy—those that demand more than five seconds of your time—should be moved into a folder called "To Review" or "Emails to Review", etc. These emails might: be long and take time to read and understand; require a thoughtful or lengthy reply; contain multiple to-dos; or represent a combination of the above. You should set aside portions of time during your day to deal with these emails; and it is helpful to arrange your time so that you are dealing with them when you have your highest energy levels. If you work best in the morning, try to tackle these emails then or vice versa if your energy peaks in the afternoon. Ideally, your "To Review" folder will be empty at the end of the day, along with your email inbox.

How to Get Started?

Great, you say, but what if I have 10,000 items in my inbox. Do I need to sift through them all? What can I do?

- Create a new folder or label called inbox-archive or inbox-(date), etc.
- Take all emails over a month or two old and move them into your new folder. If you have not dealt with them yet, you probably won't start until you have good habits and you need a

clean inbox to start good habits. Then go through the emails remaining in your inbox and deal with them.

Archiving

Archiving refers to moving an email to a relevant folder or label. I use archives for permanently storing information. My archive folders are organized according to clients, subject, and/or projects and I move all related emails into these folders. Your IT systems should support large mailboxes as cleaning out email is costly from a staff time perspective. It is far cheaper to increase mailbox space than force users to sift through old emails and determine what can be deleted, with the hope that the email is not something you'll need at a future date.

That being said, emails in the Deleted Items folder are trash. This folder is only for items you can live without. If you can not live without them, they don't belong there. They need to be archived.

Create an Effective System to Track Your Tasks

Many people use their email inbox as a task management system. Your email inbox is an effective tool for communication; it is a system for sending, receiving, and storing information. It should not be used as a task management system; it confuses the purpose and reduces your efficiency when you try to use your email inbox as a task management system. A task management system's purpose is to compile tasks, allow you to easily organize and prioritize them, and cross them off when they have been completed. You may want to track tasks on a notepad, a Word document called "Tasks," or a task management software (Doit.im, Remember the Milk, OmniFocus, Outlook's Tasks, or Google's Task Features). Task management software allows you to categorize tasks, associate dates, etc. At the beginning and end of every day you can quickly refer to the tasks, re-prioritize, and set your schedule.

These quick tips should help you progress from email overload to email inbox efficiency. I hope increased email management effectiveness will boost your success in the year ahead. Best wishes for a happy and prosperous 2012.

Russell Greenwald manages Insource Services, Inc.'s IT Consulting Practice. Insource provides expert advice and services to help clients use technology to increase their effectiveness and efficiency. If you would like to discuss how we can help, please contact Sharon Stone, Director, Business Development at sstone@insourceservices.com.