

# Four steps to an empty inbox – and how to keep it that way

Overflowing inboxes are a real struggle in today's business environment. For some of us the unread emails can number in the hundreds or even thousands. Sally McGhee, productivity thought leader and author of the *Take Back Your Life!* series on using Microsoft Outlook effectively, says it is possible to reduce the number of items in your inbox to zero and keep it there.

The only tools you will need to accomplish this is a paper, or electronic, to-do list and filing system. McGhee suggests you use the following process when approaching your emails and apply the 'Four Ds for Decision-making' model. To give you an idea of how effective it can be, figures from Microsoft suggest that:

- 50% of messages can be read and deleted/filed
- 30% can be completed in less than two minutes or delegated
- 20% must be deferred and turned in to a to-do item

## Reference system

Firstly you must understand the difference between reference information and information that requires an action.

- Reference information is information that does not require you to complete an action, but is useful information that needs to be kept. This should be filed somewhere appropriate in your filing system so that you can find it easily when you need to refer to it.
- Action information contains a request for action. It helps to store the information relating to the action on your to-do list or your calendar, or somewhere that is easily accessible. Try to remove this information from your inbox by applying the system below.

## Scheduling time

Interruptions occur on a daily basis – in fact the arrival of new emails often is the interruption – so set aside a period of uninterrupted time to sort through your emails. By being focused and disciplined you can make the right decisions regarding each email and process them quickly. To ensure that you remain uninterrupted, mark yourself as 'busy' in your calendar for an hour each day and focus solely on processing the emails in your inbox. Make this a recurring appointment in your calendar and stick to it. While it will take some getting used to, it will soon become part of the natural rhythm of your day and you will find it indispensable.

## Processing email

Decide the order in which would like to process your email – this might be by date, subject line, conversation thread or sender. Use the filters in your email system to organise your email in your preferred manner, then start from the top and work your way down. Resist the temptation to jump from one email to another as this will make you lose focus.

## Decision-making

The 'Four Ds for Decision-making' is a model that allows you to quickly make a decision about how to process each email. The Ds stand for:

- Delete it**
- Do it**
- Delegate it**
- Defer it**

**Delete it:** The decision to delete can be a tough one for many, but McGhee suggests you ask yourself these questions:

Does the message relate to a meaningful objective you are currently working on? If not, you can probably delete it. Why hang on to information that doesn't relate to your main focus?

Does the message contain information you can obtain elsewhere? If so, delete it.

Does the message contain information that you will refer to in the next six months? If not, delete it.

Does the message contain information that you are required to keep? If not, delete it.

**Do it:** If you can't delete the message, can you 'do it' in less than two minutes? If so, just do it.

**Delegate it:** If you can't delete it or do it in less than two minutes, consider whether you can delegate it. If so, do it immediately – you should be able to delegate it in less than two minutes. Once you have done so, delete the original message, or file it.

**Defer it:** If you can't delete it, do it in less than two minutes or delegate it, then the action requires a longer timeslot. Don't get distracted by it, simply add it to your to-do list and schedule a time to deal with it in your calendar, then return to processing the rest of your emails.

It might take you some time to clear the backlog in your inbox, but don't let that deter you. Once you have cleared it, your new system will keep you up to date with the information coming in and help you to easily and quickly find information that you have stored meaning that you will be more organised and productive.

Sources:  
*Take Back Your Life! Special Edition: Using Microsoft Outlook to Get Organized and Stay Organized*, Sally McGhee, Microsoft Press, 2005

*4 ways to take control of your email inbox*, Sally McGhee, 2010. November 17<sup>th</sup> 2010. ([www.microsoft.com/atwork/productivity/email.aspx](http://www.microsoft.com/atwork/productivity/email.aspx))

*Top 10 tips for keeping your e-mail inbox clean*, 2010. November 17<sup>th</sup> 2010. ([www.computerhope.com](http://www.computerhope.com))