



How to Get Your Inbox to Zero Every Day

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It's possible to get your email inbox to zero and keep it there, even if you get hundreds of emails a day.

It's not super complicated, though it does take effort and discipline. Many people simply need a crash course on best practices for keeping email under control. For example, we can easily fall into the trap of using our email inbox as a small to-do list (really bad), and sometimes we even end up using our inbox as a holding tank for major project items (far worse). As a result, we go through our days with a sense of having a thousand “open loops” continually before us.

This article will outline some simple practices to help you manage your email more effectively and maintain a sense of relaxed control. If you apply this article, you should be able to take your inbox from any point—even 15,000 emails—and get it down to zero on a regular basis.

OVERVIEW

We'll cover a 5-part process for getting your email inbox to zero and keeping it there:

- 1. SETTING UP YOUR EMAIL WORKSPACE**
 - 2. PROCESSING EMAIL EFFECTIVELY**
 - 3. HANDLING THE FOUR TYPES OF EMAILS**
 - 4. EMAIL FILING (DON'T DO IT!)**
 - 5. STAYING AT ZERO ALL DAY LONG: HOW OFTEN SHOULD YOU CHECK EMAIL?**
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01

Setting Up Your Email Workspace

Before you start processing email, you want to set up the right environment. This means having the right folders—and you don't need many.

First, your email program will have these folders by default: Inbox, Drafts, Sent, Trash. Keep those. (It's not like you could delete them anyway.)

Second, create a small set of “working” folders. These will hold the emails that you can't act on right away or that you need handy as temporary support material for a current issue or conversation. You'll see how this works later.

For now, create these folders: *Answer*, *Hold*, *Read*.

This should be straightforward in Microsoft Office or Mac Mail. In Gmail, we recommend using labels.

That's it. Your email workspace is ready to go.

Notice we didn't set up a special set of folders for filing emails after you're done with them.

That's significant. More on that later.

02 The Rules of Processing

With your email workspace set up, let's review the rules that govern how you'll process your inbox to zero. First, we need to understand a few basic rules for processing anything.

Email is actually a subcomponent of a much wider group of stuff that comes our way every day. There's voicemail, regular mail, text messages, ideas you jot down, action items from meetings, and so forth.

The way we manage our email needs to integrate with our system for managing all the other input in our lives. Although the tool itself differs, there is no difference in the principles for processing an email action item versus an action item from your boss in the hall or from your realtor on voicemail. (On these points we recommend David Allen's *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*.)

So the principles for processing email are the same as the principles for processing anything:

1. PROCESS ITEMS IN ORDER.
 2. PROCESS THEM ONE AT A TIME.
 3. NEVER PUT ANYTHING BACK IN YOUR INBOX.
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1. PROCESS ITEMS IN ORDER.

This is crucial: don't jump around your inbox. If you jump around to the emails that seem most fun or preferential, you end up looking at all the other emails several times before you get around to doing anything about them. This wastes your mental RAM. In the past, productivity gurus would say, "Handle a piece of paper once." This is sound advice. It wastes time to look at an email, say to yourself, "Not now," and then move on to another one. Instead, go through your inbox in order. Don't worry, you won't get bogged down by a super long action item in the midst of one of those emails if you follow the rest of the principles below.

2. PROCESS THEM ONE AT A TIME.

This is related to going in order. Finish processing the email you're working on before going to the next. Don't do it half-way. Deal with it decisively, then move on.

3. NEVER PUT ANYTHING BACK IN YOUR INBOX.

Your inbox is not for storing things. If there's an email you'll need to refer to later, your inbox is not the place for it. Likewise, if there's an email that seems hard to process, you don't want to skip it and leave it in your inbox for another time.

If you keep things like that in your inbox, you will have to mentally re-process your inbox every time you look at it. We'll explore below what to do with emails you'll need to refer to again soon or emails involving actions.

THE TWO QUESTIONS WHEN PROCESSING ANYTHING

So now you have the basic rules of processing: Do the items in order, process one at a time, and never put anything back into the inbox.

Next, there are two questions to ask every time you process an item:

- “What is this?”
- “What’s the next action?”

Before you can know what to do with something, you need to know what it is. Once you know what it is, then you can determine how to handle it—defining the next action.

The question “What is this?” is very powerful. When stumped about what to do about an item, simply backing up and asking “OK, what is this again?” can really turn the lights on.

03

How to Handle Different Types of Emails

Now that you have your email workspace set up and understand the rules of processing, you're ready to get going. Whether your inbox is at 50 or 500, follow this process to get it down to zero.

There are four basic types of emails:

1. EMAILS REQUIRING NO ACTION
2. EMAILS REQUIRING ACTIONS THAT TAKE LESS THAN TWO MINUTES
3. EMAILS REQUIRING ACTIONS THAT TAKE LONGER THAN TWO MINUTES
4. EMAILS CONTAINING INFORMATION YOU NEED TO KEEP

WHEN NO ACTION IS REQUIRED

Many emails require no action. For example, spam. Delete these and move on.

HANDLING QUICK EMAILS: THE TWO-MINUTE RULE

Some emails require a very quick action. In these cases, apply David Allen's "two-minute rule": if you can do it in two minutes or less, do it right away. A quick FYI email should get a quick look and then be deleted (or one-click archived). Or when a friend asks if you have the email address for so and so, you should respond to him right away and delete the email.

Note the recurring theme: When you're done with an email, delete or one-click archive it. We'll talk more about that below. If you think you need to file the email or something in it for reference, that's a special case which we'll also talk about below under "handling emails with information you need to keep."

For now, you could create another working folder called "File," and put those emails in there.

HANDLING LONGER THAN TWO-MINUTE EMAILS, PART 1

Now we get into the thick of things. It is these longer-than-two-minute emails that ruin most people's workflow system. There are two types of emails in this category: emails where the email itself is the best reminder and emails where a list in your planning system (and not the inbox) is the best reminder.

First, let's deal with emails where the email itself is the action reminder. In general, you want to work from a list, not a stack of emails. But on issues where you need a quick turn around, it often works best to simply let the email itself serve as the action reminder.

*Work from a list,
not an unorganized
stack of emails.*

This is why we had you create the three “working” folders in your email program: Answer, Hold, and Read.

Here is what you do with them:

THE ANSWER FOLDER: EMAILS REQUIRING A RESPONSE

THAT WILL TAKE OVER 2 MINUTES

If someone sends you an email that requires a detailed response, and you don’t have time to do that immediately, put it in the “Answer” folder. You don’t want to do this for every email you have to answer—if the answer can be written in two minutes, do it right away.

THE READ FOLDER: EMAILS REQUIRING READING

THAT WILL TAKE OVER 2 MINUTES

If you get an email with substantial reading material that will take more than two minutes (e.g. a project plan or a lengthy article), put it in the “Read” folder. Again, if you can read it right away, do it! You will thank yourself later.

Once the longer reads are in a folder, you can prioritize and decide which ones are even necessary to read.

THE HOLD FOLDER: EMAILS REQUIRING YOU TO WAIT ON SOMEONE ELSE'S ACTION

Sometimes you get email to which your response is dependent on someone else.

For example, if my colleague asks me what the progress is on project X, I might need to email another colleague to find out. In this case, I would email colleague 2 and put the original email into the “Hold” folder so that it’s not cluttering up my inbox while I wait. Then, when colleague 2 emails me back, I go into the “Hold” folder, respond to colleague 1, and remove the original email.

Someone might say, “Why not just delete the original email right away, and then forward the email from colleague 2 when you get it?” The reason is that having a reminder that you don’t want to depend on a response from colleague 2 for your reminder, because they might not.

Even with very responsible coworkers, sometimes colleague 2 won’t get back to you for a day or maybe at all. Your system needs to account for that. Also, you don’t want to have to keep this on your mind. If you file the original email in the “Hold” category, you can then move your immediate focus to other things.

EMPTY THESE REGULARLY

There is a danger in having these “working” email files: you could put emails in them and then just leave them there, doing nothing. That would defeat the whole point.

After you are done processing your email, or at another time in the day, go through the working folders and execute those emails. Read the “Read” emails, answer the “Answer” emails, and see if you’ve received answers to the “Hold” emails.

Have a defined time each day when you clear out these folders. Don’t leave it to your memory. It’s best to do it once a day and get to the bottom of each of them.

THE LIMITATIONS OF A SINGLE “ACTION FOLDER”

Some people opt for a single “Action” file for emails requiring longer-than-2-minute actions. This seems to simplify the process at one level, but there’s a major downside.

A generic “Action” folder is not the best idea because it’s not specific enough. Every time you go into it, you’re essentially re-processing the same things. The point of the working files is that these emails have already been processed. You know what to do with them; you just haven’t done it yet. That’s why we specify the next steps with dedicated labels: Answer, Read, and Hold.

If the next-action on an email is not specific enough to fall into one of those categories, then the next-action shouldn't be its own action reminder. Which brings us to the next section...

HANDLING LONGER THAN NEXT-ACTION EMAILS, PART 2

As we saw above, there are two kinds of longer-than-two-minute emails: emails where the email itself best serves as the action reminder and emails where a list (and not the email) serves as the action reminder.

What do you do with that second category? This is where your system for managing email needs to tie into your broader productivity system.

YOU NEED TO HAVE SOME LISTS

We'll keep it as simple as possible here, instead of going into the full details of how to set up your planning system.

In a nutshell, you want to have some lists. These lists can be kept in a Word document or in a task management program, such as OmniFocus, Asana, or Todoist. Or maybe you like to write down your actions. It doesn't matter how you do it, but you need to have lists to keep track of your deferred actions. The two main lists are (1) a next-action list and (2) a project list.

NEXT-ACTION LISTS

First, you need to have a next-action list for single actions. For example, if an action from one of your emails is that you need to “Call Fred,” and you aren’t ready to do it right then, then write “Call Fred” on your next-action list and delete the email.

PROJECT LISTS

Second, create a list for larger projects or requests requiring multiple steps. Once added to your list, delete the email, so that your list (rather than email) triggers the reminder that you need to be working on that project. Shifting your actions and projects from email to lists will alleviate more email misery than anything else.

It goes without saying: your lists will not work if you never look at them.

Now that you’ve created these lists to keep track of your longer-than-two-minute actions, be sure to review them regularly. That’s the key.

*Keeping emails in your
inbox as a reminder is
responsible for more email
misery than anything else.*

HANDLING EMAILS WITH INFORMATION YOU NEED TO KEEP

Sometimes emails don't require any actions, but contain information we'll need to refer to later. Sometimes emails with actions hold this type of information as well. What do we do with these?

There are two types of storing we need to do when it comes to email. The first is when you need to keep the actual email or its attachments. The second is when you just need to keep a few pieces of information from the email.

WHEN YOU NEED TO KEEP THE EMAIL ITSELF OR AN ATTACHMENT

We don't advocate elaborate email files.

We'll talk about this in more detail in the next section on email filing, but the gist is that it simply takes too long to file every email. Instead, only the most important emails should be filed.

Further, it's best to file them with the rest of your computer files (e.g. in your "Documents" folder or a tool like Evernote), not in your email program.

The key principle here is to have one filing system on your computer, not two. It's simpler and more organized. While it may seem like more work to file an email in "Documents" rather than in your email program, remember you should only file the most important content.

WHEN YOU ONLY NEED TO KEEP SOME DETAILS FROM THE EMAIL

Sometimes you don't need to keep the whole email, but there may be a key principle that you need to keep on your radar when working on a project. In those instances, you could have a project plan for the project the email pertains to. Rather than filing, simply paste the content you need into the project plan.

Another example is when someone emails you with a meeting time rather than using a calendar invite. In this case, create the calendar item and delete the email. Or if they send you details you need for an event or meeting, put those details in the note section of the calendar item right away and delete the email.

NOW, EMPTY YOUR "FILE" FOLDER

Now that we've covered the basics of how to handle these emails, you can now go through the "File" working folder you created (see page 4) and put those emails where they go.

HERE'S WHERE WE ARE

If you've followed the process so far, your inbox should now be at zero. Emails without actions have been deleted. Emails with less-than-two-minute actions have been completed. Emails with longer-than-two-minute actions have been moved into one of the working folders or the actions have been added to a list. And emails with information you need to keep have been filed.

04 Email Filing (Don't Do It!)

Now that we've covered the broad concepts for email filing, let's go into a little more detail about the temptation to categorize and classify every email after we are finished with it.

EMAIL REFERENCE FILES (DON'T HAVE THEM!)

Many people have an elaborate set of folders where they file their emails for permanent storage. So after dealing with an email, they put it in an email folder according to some characteristic such as what project it pertains to, who sent it, what departmental function it pertains to what topic it deals with.

This is a waste of time.

Sorry to be so blunt. We're not against filing—it's actually very important. But when it comes to email, 95% of it should simply be deleted or archived, not filed.

We receive such a large volume of email that it's incredibly inefficient to file our emails after we're done with them. Further, most of the emails that you file will never be looked at again.

In the event that you do need an email that you deleted, here's the solution that will come to your rescue, while still saving you time and allowing you to remain fully organized.

Instead of filing your emails after you're done with them, we suggest:

1. ARCHIVE EACH EMAIL AFTER YOU ARE DONE WITH IT

Don't create a bunch of reference folders where you file every email when you're done with it. Just hit delete or archive (course, you will).

2. DON'T EMPTY YOUR ARCHIVE/DELETED ITEMS

Many email clients like Gmail give you the option to "Archive" right away instead of "Delete." Make sure to archive rather than delete, because Gmail is set to automatically delete emails in the trash after a certain amount of time.

If your email client doesn't have an "archive" option, change your email settings to never empty your deleted folder automatically. You will now have a permanent record of all your email, without having to file anything. Of course, it will not be categorized. But that's part of the point: that's not the best use of your time.

Plus, this is where the search feature serves its purpose. When you do need an old email, simply search your archive.

This might mean it takes a little longer to find the email than if you had filed it in a hierarchy of folders (emphasis on “might”). But compared to the time you’re saving by not creating and maintaining that hierarchy, you’re saving far more time overall.

3. FILE REALLY IMPORTANT EMAILS

Of course, you will need quick access to some information. Keep these emails with other relevant files on a project. The important content should be saved with your other project folders, not in a hierarchy of folders in your email program. As discussed above, the principle here is to minimize the number of filing systems on your computer. Have only one, and integrate everything into it.

4. COPY IMPORTANT PROJECT INFORMATION INTO PROJECT PLANS

As also discussed above, if an email has a small piece of information that you need to reference as you work on a project, copy that into your project plan and delete the email.

NOTHING ACTIONABLE SHOULD BE IN YOUR FILES

If an email had an action tied to it, you did the action immediately, added it to one of your lists, or put the email in your “working files” for later.

When you’ve archived an email, it means actions have been processed into your system and essential information is in its proper place.

If you follow this system, you should never have to go into your email archive to figure out what you need to do. If something is in the archive, it means, “I don’t need to think about this again except as possible reference material.”

05

Staying at Zero All Day Long: How Often Should You Check Email?

Once your email inbox is at zero, a new challenge arises: keeping it there. This is actually not super hard. Or at least it's not complicated.

Keeping your inbox at zero comes down to how often you check it and what you do when you check it. A few general principles to aim for:

1. DO NOT CHECK EMAIL CONTINUALLY

If you handle your email in real-time, right as it comes in, you will not be able to focus your time and thought on other tasks. Multi-tasking is generally not effective.

If you continually check your email, you're setting yourself up for dozens of extra interruptions.

2. HAVE A PLAN FOR CHECKING YOUR EMAIL

Instead of constantly watching your email, we recommend setting specific times throughout the day. Instead process when you check it. You can make these as frequent or spread out as you need, but try for fewer than you think.

Every few hours is typically a good balance for a lot of roles. This is frequent enough to enable quick responses, while spread out enough to enable blocks of time to focus on your other responsibilities or move other projects forward.

To do this, you could set your email program to only check for new messages once an hour. Better yet, simply shut it down and open your email only when it's time to check again.

3. EACH TIME YOU CHECK EMAIL, PROCESS ALL OF IT

This is really crucial. Regardless of your plan for checking email, process your email to the bottom each time that you check it.

It can be tremendously stressful and mentally draining to check your email, only process half the messages, and then feel the mental drag of unfinished business hanging over you the rest of the day. Instead, process all the new items that come in.

If you only process some of the emails, you'll be back to the original problem of an inbox with hundreds or thousands of messages in it. The key to keeping your inbox at zero is to follow the rules of processing every time you check your email.

The reason this won't bog you down is because processing is not doing. There is a lot of doing involved, but it's of the basic sort, like the two-minute rule. When longer actions are required, simply move the email to the working files or your action lists.

So processing your email fully every time that you check it does not mean you are committing to a 45-minute session.

4. CLEAR OUT THE WORKING FOLDERS ONCE A DAY

When you put email in the “working folders,” the goal is to be deliberate about clearing those out regularly. Aim to clear them out daily if you can. Choose whatever time works for you. Maybe the afternoon is best because you want to have them cleared out before you stop work for the day. Whenever you do it, execute those folders once a day.

5. REVIEW YOUR NEXT ACTION AND PROJECT LISTS ONCE A DAY AND TAKE ACTION ON THEM

This is the same principle as with the working folders: Don’t put actions on your lists only to let them sit there. Review those lists and get those things done. You don’t need to clear these lists every day the way that you do the working email folders, but you want to be making progress.

WHEN TO BREAK THE RULES

As with most things, there are times when we need to go against the general practices outlined in this article. You need to constantly be applying good judgment.

That said, consistently following this system for managing email will create tremendous efficiencies that can lead to greater productivity.



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Matt is an author, speaker, and consultant eager to help you do work that matters and do it better. More than that, he wants to help you do your work and influence the culture in a gospel-centered way. Matt is the author of *What's Best Next* and *Creating a Business Plan that Actually Works*.



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