



Ten practical steps to tame email

We all have a love/hate relationship with email. It is an efficient way to communicate, but it can also eat up a lot of time, especially if you open and respond to every message right away. Some of the push and pull of email is unavoidable, especially if you work in a client-based business where you may need to keep a close eye on your inbox all day. Think carefully about whether the nature of your job requires you to be 'on' all the time. If not, there is no reason to drop what you are doing every time you receive an email. Of course, you want to be responsive and alert, but you also don't want to be in reaction mode all day. It is exhausting and kills your focus.

Here are ten practical steps that you can take to tame email:

1. Recognise the attraction of distraction

Let's face it email can provide a refuge away from more challenging tasks, so it is easy for it to turn into a time-wasting trap. Our brains love new information. That's why almost 2 billion people are on Facebook. It's a cascade of never-ending NEW information. Your brain loves your email inbox because it's like a river, with new stuff floating down toward you all day long.

The good news is that you can do something about it. The first step is to recognise the attraction of distraction. You have a choice. You can take measures to control it or let it control you. Read on.

2. Batch, hatch and dispatch

It is tempting just to send emails here there and everywhere in response to all that comes your way. There is a more intelligent way. Begin by **batching your sends**. Email is good for records, summaries, agreements and facts. To be effective keep it short, use a clear subject line, CC the fewest number possible (do they need to know?), batch several issues into one summary email and ensure there is an explicit call to action by a certain date.

Start to **batch your handling**. Don't 'peck' at email. Just close your email programme and turn off notifications on your phone, and then just open every hour or whenever you choose your email interval to be. Read email with this thought in mind: 'what's my action'. Then act. This helps wean you off the constant hyper vigilance of waiting for emails to appear and helps establish a healthier routine. You can then choose to focus on other tasks more efficiently.

3. Add an explanatory note to your email signature

If you are choosing to check your emails less often, it's worth adding a line to your email signature because sometimes other people's expectations around when you need to reply to their email can clash with your own.

For example: 'I check my emails at 10am, 12pm and 2pm and generally send responses between 4pm and 5:30pm.'

4. Write better email – receive better email

Help yourself by structuring your email to make it easy for the recipient to respond to you. Start with a rapid overview of the content. Then the details followed by the action you are seeking. Overview, detail,

action. Make those three headings a standard for you. Before you press 'send', re-read the email, think - if I were the recipient, what questions would I have? Then, consider - how can I edit the content to anticipate those? This discipline will save you time in dealing with the additional email which, in turn, reduces your ability to focus on more important tasks.

5. Find your zone

Deciding your zones for email is an essential strategy and will make a significant difference to your productivity as well as your well-being:

Time zones: 'chunks' of time which are email free e.g. first thing so you can reflect and plan. Spend the time instead on your big priority, be that briefing the team, writing a report or talking to a key client. How about switching off for a while and review how you are doing to allow you to refocus? Allow time to log off and review the big priorities from your To-Do List for the next day.

Place zones: 'places' which are email free e.g. meeting rooms, your bedroom. Agree that meetings will be faster, easier and more effective if everyone is 'in the room' and have not got their head in a conversation with someone on another continent. In the room, switch it off.

Behaviour zones: 'activities' which are email free e.g. family meal times. At work, make sure every day you have thinking and reflecting times. For example, at lunchtime, take a walk and leave your phone behind. If you take it with you, you will check it.

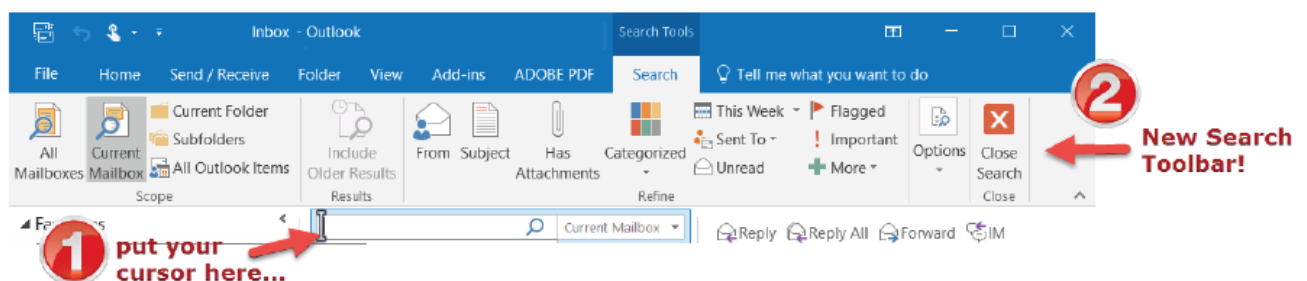
6. Search smarter

All email users constantly search for messages to do their job. Remarkably, most email users waste time because they fail to use the incredible search tools that are built into Outlook or Gmail.

For example, most Outlook users are so intent on typing keywords that they miss the time-saving toolbar. This toolbar, or "ribbon", like a loyal friend, appears every time you search. Yet 90 percent of all Outlook users say they've never noticed it.

Try this:

Click into your search rectangle in Outlook, but this time – look up at the ribbon over the search bar. Do you see this?



There it is a **SEARCH** Toolbar which can save you huge amounts of time. Astonishingly, it only appears when you search, so no one notices it. This simple exercise will illustrate how the search toolbar can help zoom right to the message you're looking for so you can get more done.

For example, say you need to find a message from your boss with an email attachment.

1. Click into the Search rectangle.
2. Click on the From: button and then type the first three letters of your boss's last name. You now see ONLY emails from your boss. If you just typed her name without clicking the From button you would see any email in which your boss's name is mentioned.
3. Now, click on the Has Attachments button (a paper clip). Now you will only see email from your boss in which an attachment was sent. Suddenly there is not so much to wade through. It's so much faster than simply typing keywords.

Note that you can also search for emails you've sent To: certain people from your Sent Mail.

7. Reduce low-priority email

Now that you're finding email faster, let's reduce the total amount of low priority email in your inbox every day. We do this by using the simple **RULE** creation tool in Outlook to auto-route those low priority messages to folders you can check once a month.

This should reduce inbox volume by up to 20%.

The key is to identify email from low priority, repeat senders and use the simplified rule feature. Think about any low priority, repeat messages like a newsletter or travel rewards updates. Then create an auto-route rule with these three quick steps:

1. From your Outlook inbox, highlight an email from a low priority, repeat sender.
2. Click Rules, then click Always Move Messages From which takes you to your email folders.
3. Select or create a destination email folder and click OK. Repeat for all low priority, repeat senders and you will get a lot less email in the future.

Apply this rule on all low-priority, repeat senders over the next few weeks and you'll achieve a 10-20% reduction in email volume.

8. Disconnect your ding

Excuse me? You know... that annoying DING! One of the reasons you can't focus is that your email is constantly dinging and triggering pop-up messages. Eliminate these nasty distractions and you'll get more high-level work done every day.

1. Go to your Outlook PC Inbox
2. Click on File > Options > Mail
3. In the "Message arrival" section, uncheck all four boxes

If you have an iPhone, you can touch Settings and Notifications to quiet things down. Also, swiping up from the bottom of your iPhone home screen and clicking on the moon icon acts as a "Do Not Disturb" function to protect your focus.

9. Transform email into scheduled tasks

Here is a final quick-hit strategy that can help de-clutter your inbox. Left click and drag any email from your inbox into your Calendar icon within Outlook for PC. This will transform your email message into a calendar item in a flash, allowing you to set a concrete reminder for completing the task requested in the email.

10. Increase the distance between you and your emails

The easier it is for you to 'quickly check' your emails, the more they will stress you out. It's a vicious cycle: you check your emails and your stress levels go up, making it more likely you'll check your emails again impulsively.

Any boundaries you can put between you and your emails will help stymie this tendency. For examples, can you disable push notifications on your phone? Or remove the email app on your phone, forcing you to open a browser and sign in every time?

On your PC, you could remove all bookmarks to emails so it's more than one 'click' to access them.

The above steps are simple and straightforward to implement. Try them and see which work best for you.

Beverly Landais executive coaching | connect@beverlylandais.co.uk | www.beverlylandais.co.uk

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