



THE 7 DEADLY SINS OF EMAIL

**WHY YOUR INBOX IS RUINING YOUR RESULTS
AND SEVEN REMEDIES TO REGAIN CONTROL**

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THE TRUTH ABOUT YOUR EMAIL

How you approach your email depends on what you believe its purpose is, and yet most people haven't really thought about it.

The email inbox is a landing spot for incoming information that either turns into work, trash, or reference material. And while we often think of work and email as separate activities, “doing” email has become a dominant part of work. Peter Drucker once said that, when it comes to knowledge work, “the task is not given; it has to be determined.” And that is exactly the *work* of email: determining the associated task contained in every message.

Our failure to see email for what it really is—not just a method of communication, but the primary means of assigning and prioritizing work—is perhaps the greatest cause of workplace stress, anxiety and frustration. It's also a massive barrier to productivity.



If you can manage and respond to email more effectively—treat it like the *work* it really is—you can dramatically improve your productivity and significantly reduce your stress.

Let's start by identifying the seven deadly sins of email, and remedies for overcoming them.

1

CHECKING EMAIL FIRST THING IN THE MORNING



Gone are the days of gently waking up to the first rays of sunlight or let's face it, even the familiar sound of your analog alarm clock. These days, your smart phone alarm jolts you awake and with phone in hand, you habitually open your email the second your eyes open. But in this groggy state, you don't actually *do* email, you just graze—looking for anything interesting or important. But because you're lying in bed, and you can't actually *do* anything about the work each email contains, you're simply starting your day anxious and overwhelmed.

Before the day has even started, you've tainted your view of what the day will look like. You've primed your mind and attention based on what you saw in your inbox rather than on things you determined to be important the night before.

THE REMEDY

The best solution is to dust off your old analog alarm clock and avoid your phone—and subsequently your email inbox—in the morning.

But, if you must look at your phone first thing, train yourself to check your calendar and the lists of important tasks you have planned for the week or day.

2

GRAZING ON EMAIL ALL THE TIME



There are two parts to this grave sin. The first is grazing. Most people peruse their inbox with no real commitment to fully read emails or take any action. Grazing does nothing to process your in-tray or ease your workload. The second part of this sin is the frequency with which we graze. Many of us are addicted to our email. We glance at email immediately after finishing a call, when we're waiting for the train, when sitting in bed at night, when we're in the middle of doing meaningful work, etc. We simply can't help but peek at email

every five to ten minutes. As a result, we are always on edge and distracted. We can't focus on a single task. And we're constantly reacting rather than acting thoughtfully. Everything new seems most important.

The key to having enough time to (1) process email, (2) complete meaningful work, and (3) respond to surprises is to never do all three at once. When you do all three at the same time, you can't do any of them well. You waste time and burn energy.

THE REMEDY

Each day, set aside two to three sessions (ranging from 30- to 60-minutes) to do nothing else but process email.

After a few days, you won't need as much time because your backlog will start to disappear. During this time, you should read each email, decide what it means to you, and then park the results of that decision making in the best place (a list, a calendar, somebody else's inbox, trash, reference folder, etc.). To avoid the email temptation outside of those sessions, turn off email notifications on your phone and close your email app when you are doing focused work.

3

DOING WORK WHILE EMAILING

It's a vicious and familiar cycle. You start reading emails, find something actionable and get to work on it immediately. Forty-five minutes later, you realize you need to join a call. After the call ends you resume "grazing" on email only to find something else actionable and time-consuming in the next message. You follow that action down the rabbit hole, and the cycle continues.

Is it any wonder you never get to the bottom of the inbox?



THE REMEDY

When processing email, only process email.

You'll get through more email in a shorter amount of time if you avoid going down rabbit holes of time-consuming tasks (time-consuming tasks should be saved for when you actually have the time to focus on them). The one exception is any task you can complete in two minutes or less. If the work generated by your email can truly be done in two minutes or less, it's generally more efficient to do it in the moment rather than later. The good news is that in an active email environment, it's likely that at least 30 percent of your actionable e-mails will take less than two minutes to read and respond to or act on.

4

RE-READING EMAILS

We often read an email and think to ourselves, “I don’t have time to think about this” or “This is not important right now” or “This is trash.” We then leave the email in the inbox only to return to it later and re-read it—possibly having the exact same thoughts and starting the cycle over again. No wonder we rarely feel caught up. Most people say they don’t have enough time in the day to get everything done. And yet, somehow, they willingly make time to re-read emails. **See the irony here?**



THE REMEDY

Don’t just read emails, process them.

Only read an email if you intend to decide what it means and park the results of that thinking somewhere—calendar, trash, to-do list, etc. After you’ve made a decision, move on! Cognitive scientists have demonstrated the reality of “decision fatigue”—every decision you make, big or small, diminishes your brain power. Deciding to “decide later” about an email is one of those decisions that drains your mental fuel tank. David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done*, says this: “Decision-making when things show up instead of when they blow up is actually a habit that can be developed and enhanced. The trick is to get used to the clean feeling of having decided, instead of sitting on a fence.”

5

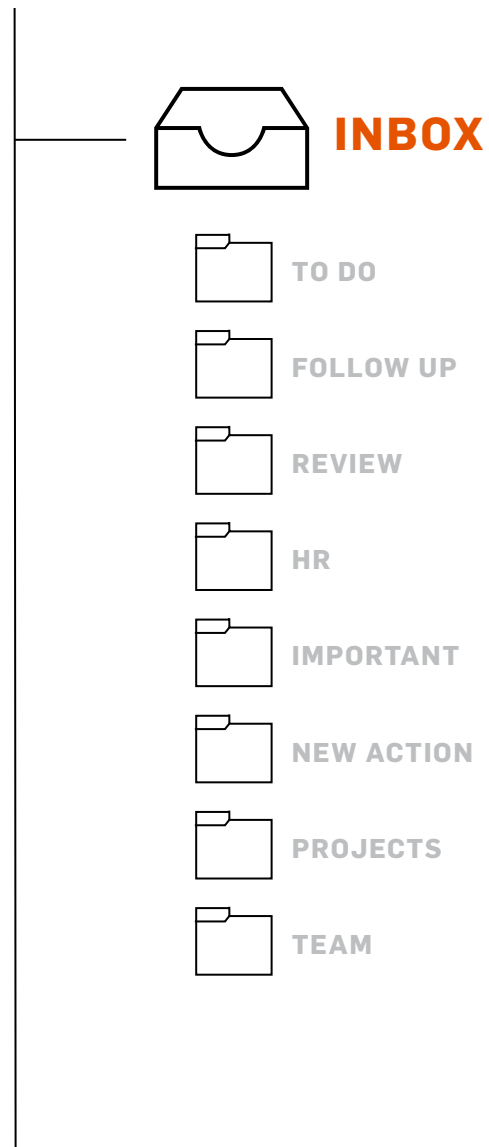
CATEGORIZING ACTIONABLE EMAILS INTO MULTIPLE FOLDERS

This is a subtle sin that many have fooled themselves into believing is a good practice. Here's how it plays out: We read an email quickly or partially and then move it to one of our many subfolders in our inbox. We do this over and over until our inbox appears empty but in fact remains full. For emails that are for future reference only, this makes sense; but not for emails that might need an action taken.

Partially reading emails and then moving them to different folders is not clarifying and can be quite unproductive. That's why the idea of "inbox at zero" brings more stress than relief for most people. Their inbox might be empty, but they didn't actually process the emails so they're still un-addressed (and hidden from sight). There are a few problems with this approach:

- A.** You must remember to find that email when you are ready to do work.
- B.** You must remember where you put it.
- C.** You must re-read it (a great use of time!).

Another manifestation of this practice is overuse of flags in the inbox. When you flag too many things, the flag loses its power. You haven't actually made things clearer or easier for yourself.



5

THE REMEDY

Approach email as something to decide on first and work on later. Clarify what each message means to you and determine where it belongs.

Fully read the email and consider whether each message is actionable or not.

NO, THIS IS NOT ACTIONABLE:

Determine whether it's something you need to **File**, **Trash**, or **Incubate** (items you don't want to or can't act on immediately but may act on later).

YES, THIS IS ACTIONABLE:

Determine whether you should **Delegate It**, **Do It Now** (tasks that take two minutes or less), or **Do It Soon**.

Notice that there are just six commands you should use when processing email:

- | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1. File | 4. Delegate |
| 2. Incubate | 5. Do Now |
| 3. Trash | 6. Do Soon |

That's it. When you discover that you can respond to email in only one of a few ways, you can more quickly get clear on messages and their corresponding actions. No need to file away and feign clarity—just get clear the first time. Once you are clear you can park those items where they belong (calendar, list, trash, someone else's inbox).

6

NOT TRASHING ENOUGH

If you're like most people, about 20% of your inbox consists of things you would deem trash. And yet you allow those things to stay in your inbox, often re-reading them again and again. The ease with which we trash mail from our physical mailbox doesn't seem to translate to the computer, perhaps because emails don't take up physical space. And yet every message takes up mental space!



THE REMEDY

Locate your delete key and use it liberally!

Deleting every message you don't need *when* you read it the first time is crucial to managing the flood. When in doubt, throw it out. If you've let emails pile up, start with a purge. Sometimes it's easier to clean house by trashing messages based on their source—you can often dump several at a time that way.

Also, consider taking the unsubscribe challenge. Spend ten minutes each day for the next week to unsubscribe from unwanted communications. If you get fewer emails, you'll have less to process. Don't underestimate how many unwanted emails you get each week.

7

TREATING YOUR INBOX LIKE A STORAGE BIN

Most people use their email inbox for storing actionable requests, reference material, and even trash, a practice that quickly numbs your mind; you have to reassess everything every time you review your messages. My colleague once worked with someone who had 42,000 emails in their inbox. Yikes!

“It takes much less energy to maintain e-mail backlog at zero than at a thousand.”

DAVID ALLEN
AUTHOR, *GETTING THINGS DONE*



THE REMEDY

Your inbox needs to be regularly emptied to be maximally functional.

Work to empty it every 24-48 hours. “Empty” does not mean completing all the work entailed in your emails; it means making decisions about what each message means and organizing that information accordingly. The same applies to any inbox—whether the tray on your desk or your voicemail. Inboxes should be processing stations, not storage bins.

CHOOSE CONTROL

For most of us, work lives and dies by email. But it's up to you whether you'll allow this never-ending stream of requests, communication, and noise to get the best of your productivity, results, and sanity.

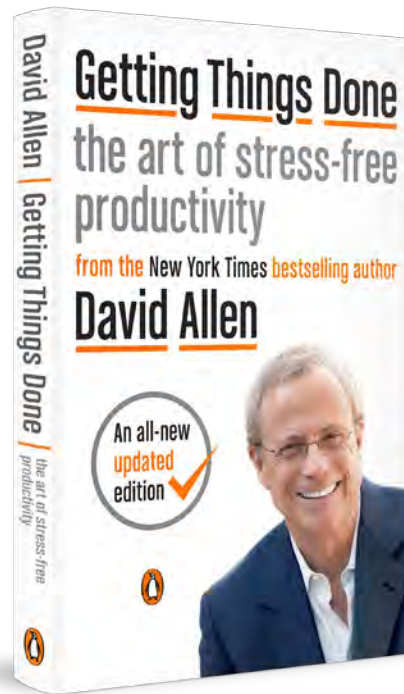
Yes, it's true the most important time you should spend each day is doing focused work connected to your larger goals. But processing vague email into meaningful actions IS part of your work.

Once you see email as work and get into the habit of processing your in tray, not just grazing on it, you'll be in the position to work proactively rather than reactively and do meaningful, rather than mundane work.



AUTHOR

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Are You Ready for Stress-Free Productivity?

The Getting Things Done (GTD®) methodology was developed 30 years ago by *New York Times* bestselling author David Allen. While David originally developed the methodology by observation, experimentation, and practice, researchers have since shown that the principles taught in GTD relieve cognitive load, allow for increased focus, even result in peak performance, or what is popularly called “flow.” In other words, GTD isn’t only about getting things done. The real promise of GTD is efficient engagement. It’s productivity with presence and purpose. The course is available in on-demand, virtual, and in-person learning formats.

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