

Empty Your Inbox – 4 Ways to Take Control of Your E-mail

By Sally McGhee

If your e-mail Inbox is out of control, you might want to rethink your methods for organising your e-mail and emptying your Inbox. Developing a new approach to processing your Inbox can help you to gain more control, improve your response time, and keep up with critical actions and due dates.

This article covers four key factors that can help you process your e-mail more efficiently – both at home and at the office. Although some of the productivity tools mentioned here are specific to Microsoft Outlook (<http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/outlook>) (Outlook 2010, Outlook 2007, and Outlook Web Access), most of the techniques – and even the organisational attitude described here – can help you to more efficiently process e-mail and empty your Inbox, even if you use an e-mail application other than Outlook.

1. Set up a simple and effective e-mail reference system

The first step toward an organised Inbox is understanding the difference between *reference information* and *action information*.

- *Reference information* is information that is not required to complete an action; it is information that you keep in case you need it later. Reference information is stored in your reference system – an e-mail reference folder, your My Documents folder, or a company intranet site, for example.
- *Action information* is information you *must have* to complete an action. Action information is stored with the action, either on your to-do list or on your Calendar. (If the action needed is a detailed reply, try converting information into professional communication using these tips on Creating incredible documents more easily using Office 2010 (<http://www.microsoft.com/atwork/skills/office2010.aspx#fbid=O2KcslwAcgM>).

Most people receive a considerable amount of reference information through e-mail. Sometimes as much as one-third of your e-mail is reference information. So it is essential to have a system that makes it easy to transfer messages from your Inbox into your e-mail reference system – a series of e-mail file folders where you store reference information to ensure you have easy access to it later.

After you take care of filing your reference information, you can use the next three steps to handle the e-mail that you have to do something with – your *action information*.

2. Schedule uninterrupted time to process and organise e-mail

How many times are you interrupted every day? It's nearly impossible to complete anything when there are constant interruptions from the phone, people stopping by your office, and instant messaging. So it's critical that you set aside uninterrupted time to process and organise your e-mail.

Many e-mail messages require you to make a decision. The best decisions require focus, and focus requires uninterrupted attention. Establish a regular time each day to process your e-mail so that you can empty your Inbox. Of course, you can scan your e-mail during the day for urgent messages or requests from your boss.

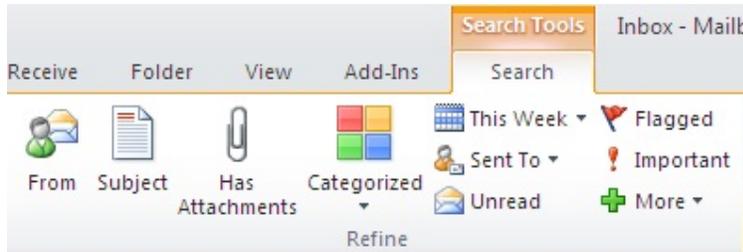
Book yourself a recurring appointment for an hour a day to process e-mail, and mark that time as "busy." During that hour, don't answer the phone or take interruptions, and work only on processing your Inbox. You can also turn off the audio alert that sounds each time you receive a new e-mail – which can be a distraction in itself. In Outlook, click the **File** tab. Click **Options**. On the **Mail** tab, under **Message arrival**, clear the **Play a sound** check box.

At first, keeping these appointments will take discipline. But over time, the discipline becomes habit. And after you completely empty your Inbox, you'll see the value of this one hour a day and you'll stick to it like glue.

Microsoft Outlook 2010 makes it easier to keep this e-mail appointment and to process your Inbox. The new anywhere access features of Outlook 2010 mean that you don't have to be at home or at the office to keep your daily e-mail management appointment.

Conversation view in Office 2010 (<http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/outlook-help/view-e-mail-messages-by-conversation-HA010362041.aspx?CTT=1>) enables you to organise e-mail folders by date and conversation. When Conversation view is turned on, messages that share the same subject appear as conversations that can be viewed as expanded or collapsed, helping you to quickly review and act on messages or complete conversations.

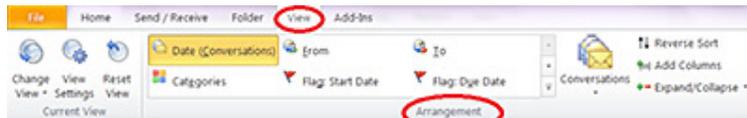
Also, improved search tools in Office 2010 make it easier to narrow your search results by using criteria, like sender or subject keywords, and other information, such as attachments. The **Search Tools** contextual tab includes a set of filters that efficiently focus your search to isolate the items that you want. For more information, see Find a message or item by using Instant Search (<http://office2010.microsoft.com/client/helppreview14.aspx?AssetId=HA010354952&Icid=1033&NS=OUTLOOK&Version=14&tl=2&CTT=5&origin=HA010354412>).



Instant Search in Outlook 2010 provides many ways to search your e-mail for specific messages.

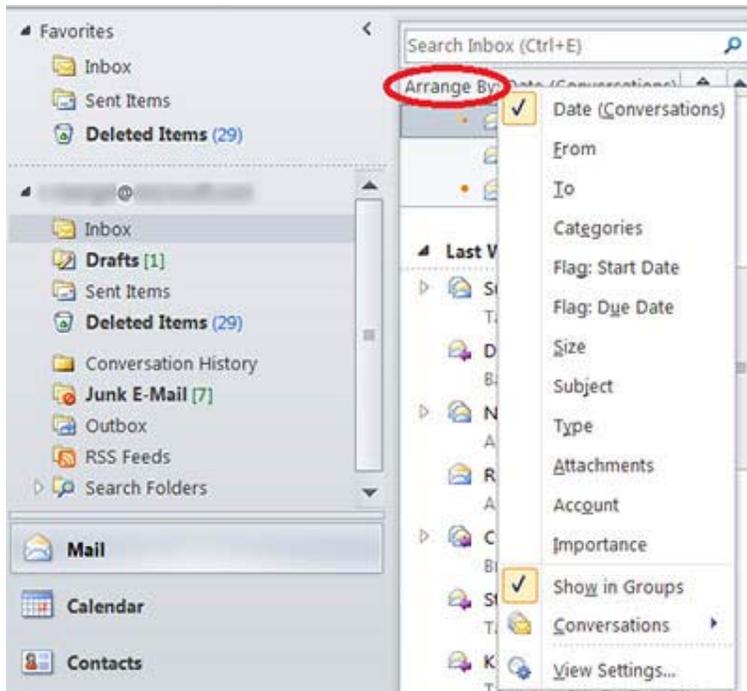
3. Process one item at a time; starting at the top

When you sit down to process your e-mail, the first step is to sort it by the order in which you will process it. For example, you can filter by date, by subject, or even by the sender or receiver of the e-mail message. In Outlook 2010, on the **View** tab, in the Arrangement group, click the arrangement option you want.



*From the **View** tab, you can filter your e-mail by date, category, sender or receiver, and more.*

You can also change the arrangement directly from your Inbox. To display the list of options, under the **Search** box, right-click the **Arrange By:** box.



The **Arrange By** box in your Inbox gives you convenient access to even more options to arrange your messages.

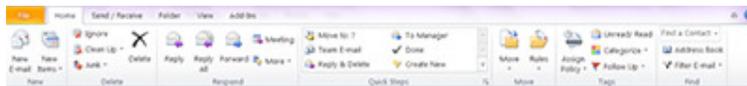
Tip: If you use Outlook 2010, enable the reading pane (called the preview pane in Outlook 2007) so that you can view your messages without having to open them. To enable the reading pane, on the **View** tab, in the Layout group, click **Reading Pane**. To enable the Outlook 2007 preview pane, on the **View** menu, click **AutoPreview**.

Resist the temptation to jump around in your Inbox in no particular order. Begin processing the message at the top of your Inbox and only move to the second one after you've handled the first. This can be hard at first, when you might have thousands of messages in your Inbox. But as you reduce the number of messages over a few sessions, eventually you'll get to the point where you can process the 60–100 messages you get every day and regularly get your Inbox down to zero.

4. Use the "Four Ds for Decision-Making" model

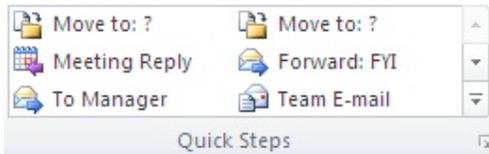
The "Four Ds for Decision-Making" model (4 Ds) is a valuable tool for processing e-mail, helping you to quickly decide what action to take with each item and how to remove it from your Inbox.

The expanded Ribbon in Office 2010 is designed to help you quickly find the tools that you need to complete your tasks. Features are organised in logical groups collected together under tabs. You can also customise the Ribbon to include tabs you personalise to match your own style.



The expanded Ribbon in Outlook 2010 replaces Outlook 2007 menus, giving you easy access to tools on conveniently organised tabs.

The Quick Steps feature, new in Outlook 2010, speeds up managing your e-mail even more. This feature enables you to perform the multi-stepped tasks you use most often, such as moving e-mail to a specific folder or moving a message and replying to it with a meeting request, with a single click. The Quick Steps gallery includes buttons for one-click file and flag, sending messages to your team, and other popular commands. For more information, see Automate common or repetitive tasks with Quick Steps (<http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/outlook-help/automate-common-or-repetitive-tasks-with-quick-steps-HA010370689.aspx?CTT=1>).



The Quick Steps feature turns your most frequent tasks – whether forwarding messages to your co-workers or copying messages to a specific folder – into one-click operations.

Tip: Learning a few basic keyboard shortcuts in Outlook 2010 can make performing these tasks even easier and faster. Read our article on how to save time with quick computer shortcuts (http://www.microsoft.com/athome/organization/compshortcuts.aspx#fbid=xqGOANj_vWv).

Decide what to do with each and every message

How many times have you opened, reviewed, and closed the same e-mail message or conversation? Those messages are getting lots of attention but very little action. It is better to handle each e-mail message only once before taking action – which means you have to decide what to do with it and where to put it. With the 4 Ds model, you have four choices:

1. Delete it
(http://www.microsoft.com/atwork/productivity/email.aspx?WT.mc_id=MSCOM_EN_US_AA_N_NEWS_131Z6ENUS22134#fbid=O2KcslwAcgM?Delete-it)
2. Do it
(http://www.microsoft.com/atwork/productivity/email.aspx?WT.mc_id=MSCOM_EN_US_AA_N_NEWS_131Z6ENUS22134#fbid=O2KcslwAcgM?Do-it)
3. Delegate it
(http://www.microsoft.com/atwork/productivity/email.aspx?WT.mc_id=MSCOM_EN_US_AA_N_NEWS_131Z6ENUS22134#fbid=O2KcslwAcgM?Delegate-it)
4. Defer it
(http://www.microsoft.com/atwork/productivity/email.aspx?WT.mc_id=MSCOM_EN_US_AA_N_NEWS_131Z6ENUS22134#fbid=O2KcslwAcgM?Defer-it)

Delete it

Generally; you can delete about half of all the e-mail you get. But some of you shudder when you hear the phrase "delete e-mail." You're hesitant to delete messages for fear that you might need them at some point. That's understandable, but ask yourself honestly: What percentage of information that you keep do you actually use?

If you do use a large percentage of what you keep, your method is working. But many of us keep a lot more than we use. Here are some questions to ask yourself to help you decide what to delete:

- Does the message relate to a meaningful objective you're currently working on? If not, you can probably **delete it**. Why keep information that doesn't relate to your main focus?
- Does the message contain information you can find elsewhere? If so, **delete it**.
- Does the message contain information that you will refer to within the next six months? If not, **delete it**.
- Does the message contain information that you're required to keep? If not, **delete it**.

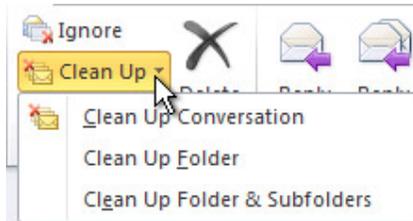
Outlook 2010 helps you get rid of the "noise" in your Inbox by providing two new commands: **Ignore Conversation** and **Clean Up Conversation**. If a conversation is no longer relevant, you can prevent additional responses from appearing in your Inbox. The **Ignore** command moves the whole conversation and any future messages that arrive in the conversation to the **Deleted Items** folder.



Easily delete an entire conversation so that no new responses to it will appear in your Inbox.

When a message contains all the previous messages in the conversation, you can click **Clean Up** to eliminate redundant messages. For example, as people reply to a conversation, the response is at the top and the previous messages in the conversation are below. Use the **Clean Up** command to keep only the most recent message that includes the whole conversation. For more information, see Use Conversation Clean Up to eliminate redundant messages

(<http://office.microsoft.com/client/helppreview14.aspx?AssetId=HA101867736&lcid=1033&NS=OUTLOOK&Version=14&tl=2&CTT=5&origin=HA010354412>).



Cleaning up your conversations makes it easier to stay focused on the task being discussed.

Do it (in less than two minutes)

If you can't delete the e-mail messages, ask yourself, "What specific action do I need to take?" and "Can I do it in less than two minutes?" If you can, just do it.

There is no point in filing an e-mail or closing an e-mail if you can complete the associated task in less than two minutes. Try it out – see how much mail you can process in less than two minutes. I think you will be extremely surprised and happy with the results. You could file the message, you could respond to the message, or you could make a phone call. You can probably handle about one-third of your e-mail messages in less than two minutes.

Office 2010 helps you respond to e-mail messages faster. You can view the availability of a person and instantly reach out to them using a variety of communication methods – all on a new easy-to-access contact card (<http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/outlook-help/use-the-contact-card-in-business-contact-manager-HA010387637.aspx?CTT=1>

). You can even customise the context menu of the contact card (<http://msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/library/ee909466.aspx>) to include tasks you perform most often, saving you more time.

Delegate it

If you can't delete it or do it in two minutes or less, can you forward the e-mail to an appropriate team member who can take care of the task?

If you can delegate it (forward it to another team member to handle), do so right away. You should be able to compose and send the delegating message in about two minutes. After you have forwarded the message, delete the original message or move it into your e-mail reference system.

Defer it

If you cannot delete it, do it in less than two minutes, or delegate it, the action required is something that only you can accomplish and that will take more than two minutes. Because this is your dedicated e-mail processing time, you need to defer it and deal with it after you are done processing your e-mail. You'll probably find that about 20 per cent of your e-mail messages have to be deferred.

There are two things you can do to defer a message: Turn it into an actionable task, or turn it into an appointment. When you're using Outlook, you can defer e-mails that require action by dragging the messages to your Task List to turn them into tasks. Name the task to clearly state the required action so that you don't have to reopen the e-mail message. The result is a clearly defined list of actions on your Task List that you can prioritise and schedule to complete on your Calendar. Or you can turn the message into a meeting request by dragging it to your Calendar.

Tip: Use the To-Do Bar in Outlook 2010 and Outlook 2007 to drag an e-mail message from an e-mail folder to a date on your Calendar or to your Task List. On the **View** tab, in the Layout group, click the **To-Do** Bar. When the bar appears, drag the message to your Calendar or to your Task List. This copies the message to the new location; it doesn't move it out of the original mail folder, so you'll still be able to find what you need. Learn more about managing your Task List in Outlook (<http://www.microsoft.com/atwork/productivity/streamline.aspx#fbid=O2KcslwAcgM>).

Use the 4 Ds model every day

Using the 4 Ds model on a daily basis makes it easier to handle a large quantity of e-mail. Our experience shows that, on average, people can process about 100 e-mail messages an hour. If you receive 40 to 100 messages per day, all you need is one hour of uninterrupted e-mail processing time to get through your Inbox. Our statistics show that of the e-mail you receive:

- Fifty per cent can be deleted or filed.
- Thirty per cent can be delegated or completed in less than two minutes.
- Twenty per cent can be deferred to your Task List or Calendar to complete later.

Of course, if you have a backlog of hundreds of messages, it will take time to get to the point where your daily routine keeps you up to date. It's important to get that backlog down, so I would suggest setting blocks of time aside to work through it. Then, you can really enjoy processing your messages every day using the 4 Ds.

Source: http://www.microsoft.com/atwork/productivity/e-mail.aspx?WT.mc_id=MSCOM_EN_US_AAN_NEWS_131Z6ENUS22134#fbid=O2KcslwAcgM