

To-do lists and your email inbox

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This is a guest article by Jeff Davidson

Many people today, unfortunately, are relying on their email inbox as their primary, or default, management system. Email is a tool, a wonderfully effective tool if used properly, but in no way should the emails you receive serve as a substitute for the goals and objectives you have established for any given day. The items that constitute your to-do list, ideally, are included because of their importance or possible urgency.

The tasks associated with the email messages you receive often seem more important, and certainly more urgent, than they may actually prove to be. The fine art of transferring tasks associated with email messages you receive to your daily to-do list is something with which many people continually grapple.

Email messages that you receive basically fall into one of four categories:

1. Those that you need to handle.
2. Those that you can delegate.
3. Those that you should file.
4. Those that you should delete.

Approaching these categories in reverse order of importance, those that can be deleted ought to represent the largest of the four categories.

Even with effective spam filters in place and carefully developed white-listed emails and black-listed emails, the majority of messages that you receive do not require a response, significant action on your part or even being retained. The nature of the flow of information and communication via email today all but dictates that you can safely delete most of the emails you receive.

Another category of email messages includes those that rightfully should be filed. In this case, the email itself doesn't require action, or at least immediate action, but is not something that you can necessarily delegate to another. The message does contain information of value and, thus, is worth retaining. The question becomes, where do you park such messages?

There are a variety of options for storing messages, including: by project, by client, by staff person and by date. In some cases it makes sense to store messages in two different places, although you don't want to end up glutting your system because you have saved too many messages in duplicate. Virtually all email software today

comes with word search capabilities, so you never really can “lose” an email message.

All email messages worth retaining offer in some way the promise of a more “favorable future.” By that I mean that the information contained within will help you to be more effective at your job; solve a problem or issue for your organization, your client or yourself; or help you to meet obligations such as filing taxes, complying with regulations or supplying critical information in a timely manner.

If an email message (or any other form of information in digital or hard copy form) does not offer the promise of a “favorable future,” you most likely do not need to retain it. Ideally, everything stored in digital files, filing cabinets, desk drawers and any place else is done so because of the aforementioned “favorable future” that it supports in relation to your tasks or activities.

The next category of email messages among the four basic categories represents those that contain tasks or requests that you can delegate to others. Depending upon the staff, network or support group you have in place, a surprising number of the tasks associated with email communications that you receive might appropriately and, indeed, best be handled by someone other than yourself.

This is particularly true if you hold a senior position in an organization or run your own enterprise, and you serve as the point person for communications from customers, clients, vendors, associations and the public in general.

The more often you can delegate tasks associated with email messages the better. As an executive or entrepreneur, at times it can be tempting to try to handle the brunt of messages that come your way. The wise manager knows, however, that delegation is the key to getting more done day-to-day. Hence, such tasks should not make your daily to-do list other than that monitoring how the person to whom you delegated the work is progressing.

The fourth and most important category of email messages that you receive on a daily basis are those that you, and you alone, need to address because you have the background, relationship, information or sole authority to do so. In many cases, the email messages that you need to handle, fortunately, require only a brief response such as “Yes, proceed,” “No, let’s hold off” and so on. Other such communications merely require your confirmation of reception.

Then there are those messages that will require significant input on your part. Fortunately, in a course of an average day, you might receive only a handful of those. They may require anywhere from five minutes to two hours of your time. When you receive such emails, usually it is abundantly clear that you and you alone must address the issue. Yes, the buck does stop here, with you. Such tasks need to be added to your daily to-do list and rightfully belong among the most important tasks you’ll address in the near term.

Once again, recognize that in adding such tasks to your to-do list you are using email as a tool that supports your daily goals and objectives but not as your primary, or default, management system. You use email to rapidly transfer data, address requests, offer quick replies and avoid having to tie up more time via phone calls or onsite meetings. Phone calls and onsite meetings nevertheless remain valuable tools in your managerial arsenal for getting things done based on the nature of the task at hand, who’s involved, the associated milestones and the desired, ultimate objective.

By proactively managing your email inbox, allocating the messages you receive in the manner described above and judiciously managing your daily to-do list, you can continue to be a highly productive career professional even in this age of over-information and communication. Others will marvel at your ability to maintain control while staying in balance and happy.

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