

Steve’s Computer Tip

#111 EMAIL

It's one of the most heavily used kinds of software, and yet, 'it can make us feel like we're struggling to keep our heads above water. Do you begin every day reading email, thinking you'll reply to the most important ones, only to look up and realize an hour has already slipped by?

With a few very simple organizational tricks, you can be more efficient with email. Some of these tips utilize functions found in most email programs, but many of them are ways that you can change your own habits to affect your email workflow. They restructure how you use different email functions, adding a little bit of foresight so that when it comes time to delete and archive messages, you've already done much of the hard work.

Let me share with you some of my favorite email tips. I've tried to explain them in a way that will apply to most people, but do bear in mind that how you use email might differ from how other people use it. My workflow may not match yours exactly. And that's kind of the point. There are likely shortcuts and efficiencies that I've found because of my workflow that you might not have ever discovered in yours, even if they're totally applicable.

1. Delete first.
When I first open my email inbox every day, the very first thing I do is delete unnecessary messages, without opening them at all. I do this step even before opening and reading high-priority mail. Most of the messages I toss are auto-alerts, and I can tell from the subject line whether they require action—usually, they don't. Keep in mind that moving messages to the trash bin does not wipe them out immediately. If you realize later in the day you needed a message, you can still retrieve it, so long as you haven't emptied the trash bin yet.

Probably the worst habit I've seen in email users is that they hang onto messages that they think they will act on, but never do (more on that in a bit). If you can identify even ten percent of your daily incoming mail as "very likely not requiring action" so that you can delete it without opening any of the messages, you'll be in much better shape to start your day productively.

2. Write short.
When writing emails, say what you mean, be clear, and use as few words as possible. There are some situations that call for complete sentences and adherence to formal language, but I'm of the mind that fragments are extremely useful in most other email communication. Certainly, sometimes you want to be highly detailed to take advantage of the paper-trail aspect of email: there's a record of everything. But use concise, clear, and straightforward language when you can.

3. Reuse sent messages.
If there are certain messages that you send over and over, such as confirmations or sign-off messages for a repeating task, reuse a sent message from the last email of that kind. Strip out the "Re:" in the subject line, update details if need be, and send. Why do the same task over and over?

4. Reuse subject lines.
Reusing sent messages increases your efficiency by minimizing writing. Reusing subject lines, a related trick, enables you to more easily and quickly delete or archive old messages.

5. Use groups.
If you mail the same group of people repeatedly, set up a group or email alias. In Outlook, it's called a Distribution List. Not only will you save yourself time by not having to type each person's name when you mail the group, you'll also set yourself up for easy deleting tactics, as explained in the next section.

7. Turn off notifications.
Does an alert pop up every time you receive a new incoming message? Only in the rarest cases is this feature helpful. If instant alerts are pertinent to your job (and you'll know if they are), leave them alone. Everyone else, however: Turn them off permanently. Email alerts are highly distracting.

8. Close email when you need to focus.
Close your email application or sign out of webmail when you need to do work that requires real focus for at least 30 minutes. "Unthinkable!" you protest. Try it. When an email program is open, it's tempting to check periodically (or obsessively) for new mail. Closing the program entirely removes the temptation.

9. Use auto-replies for more than just out-of-office messages.
If you honestly worry that someone will try to contact you with an urgent matter in the stretch of time that you'll have your email turned off, set up an out of office or auto-reply message that says, "If this is a highly urgent matter, please call me on..." and give your phone number or your assistant's number. You can even set up an auto-reply that only goes to internal employees.

10. Delete! Or at the very least, file messages into folders.
Know when to let go. Set aside your good intentions and don't hang onto messages on which you probably won't act. Leaving unimportant messages in your inbox is highly unproductive, distracting, and only reminds you of what you would like to do in a perfect world but can't.

If deleting seems too severe, set up folders (I like to name my folders by year and month and move those "good intentions" emails out of your inbox. I promise you, they're not doing you any favors being front and center.