

Randy Dean's Top Ten E-mail Timesavers/Productivity Enhancers



As a time management, productivity, and e-mail efficiency expert, I'm always looking for ways to find a few seconds here and there in things I'm already doing anyway, and e-mail is something I'm doing every day! There are a number of “handy strategies” when it comes to managing your e-mail, and using these tips can make a massive difference in your productivity AND your sanity. Here are some of the very best from my recent Amazon.com e-mail best seller, *Taming the E-mail Beast: 45 Key Strategies for Better Managing Your E-mail Overload*:

1. **Handle “Quick Little” E-mails Right Now.** For nearly 20 years, I've been following a principle I originally learned from time management guru David Allen – to handle “quick little things” when they come up the very first time I look at them. This keeps you from reviewing them multiple times before taking action, as well as getting buried under these items too. I've been following this rule with my inbox, and I hit “e-mail zero” nearly every day! My personal rule – if I think acting on that e-mail will take 3-minutes or less, I just get it done right now! Then, I file or delete that e-mail and get it out of my inbox.
2. **“Task” E-mails Taking Longer.** In my opinion, most e-mails are basically a task or a bundle of tasks you need to get done. You need to review. You need to reply. You need to forward. You need to take an action. You need to schedule an appointment, or create a new contact. Some of these things are quick – get those done right now! But for those e-mails that will take longer than 3-minutes, I figure out what the embedded task(s) is, and then I add it to my task list. Then, when I get “open block” time, I can prioritize the most important and/or urgent tasks and act on those as appropriate. You can task your e-mails on a paper To Do list, or use a software program like Outlook. But whatever you do, once you identify the task in the e-mail, once again, either delete that e-mail for file it in an appropriate folder for later reference.
3. **Don't Use Your E-mail Inbox as a “De Facto” Task List!** Now, if you read tips #1 & #2 above, you realize I don't like people leaving e-mails that have been read in their inbox. Here's the simple reason why – if you are like most people, when you leave an e-mail in your inbox, it is because there is an action you still intend to take on that e-mail. But typically, that action is not clearly defined in your e-mail's subject line, so when you come back to it three or four days later, you have to go through the entire review process again to figure out what you want/need to do. Better to define the task one time, and act on it when it reaches the top of your task list! Some people are also using their inbox as their “one and only” file folder, but then you'll start mixing “active” e-mails with “archive” e-mails, meaning you'll be re-reading messages that you are already done with – also not the best use of your time!
4. **Make Folders and Use Them!** I think it is fine to keep your e-mails if you need them for retention and reference. Just don't keep them in your inbox. Instead, build a personal file “infrastructure” for your e-mails, with folders that naturally make sense to you, so you can quickly and easily file your “done” e-mails, as well as quickly and easily find them when you need them. (And, if you get a new e-mail you want to keep, but you don't have a good folder for it, MAKE ONE!) Some programs, like MS Outlook,

even allow you to make folders inside of folders – that gives you even more flexibility in your file structure – just be careful to not make such a complex folder structure that you then start having a hard time filing and finding – the old adage K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple Stupid!) is perfectly apropos here.

5. **But, Don't Keep Attachments You Don't Need!** Perhaps the single biggest complaint I receive from people is that they are “busting out the size limits of their mailbox.” They perceive it to be because they have too many e-mails, but I always tell them: “What's more important than the number of e-mails you have is the size of the e-mails you have.” If you get an e-mail that has attachments you no longer need or that you've already saved to a different location, delete the attachments! And go check your “Sent” folder too – if that is full of large e-mails with large attachments, once again, delete those attachments (in MS Outlook and many other popular e-mail software programs, you can open an e-mail with attachments and then delete the unneeded attachments.) If your e-mail software doesn't easily allow for you to delete attachments, consider forwarding the e-mail back to yourself, but remove the attachment before forwarding. Then, delete the original e-mail. This will solve many if not all of your file size problems.
6. **Make Your Sent E-mails “Task Oriented.”** Perhaps the second biggest complaint that I get by people in my programs or on my blog are when they receive e-mails with “no action” or where the action is unclear. I try to coach my clients to follow a strategy that for every e-mail sent, every recipient has a clear, defined task with a clear due date. This helps mitigate the overuse of those pesky “FYI/Just thought you'd want to know” e-mails that clog up far too many inboxes. Tell each recipient 1) why they got the e-mail, 2) what they need to know in the e-mail, 3) what they need to do in the e-mail (the task that needs to be done), and 4) when they need to get it done by. Can you imagine if every e-mail you sent or received was this clear on defined actions? The result would be much less confusion, much more confidence, and higher team productivity.
7. **NEVER Send an E-mail With a Single Open Task to a Large Group!** This is one of my biggest e-mail pet peeves – the person that likes to send out a single task in an e-mail to a large group of recipients, with a top line that says, “Somebody needs to take care of this.” Human nature indicates NOBODY will, because no one truly owns the task. Better practice: make it VERY clear who owns an individual task in an e-mail if the e-mail is sent to a larger group, with VERY clear deadlines. No more “passing the buck!”
8. **Use Your “Signatures” Tool as an “Auto-emailer”.** Most people are clever enough to figure out how to create an auto-signature for their outgoing e-mails. This is a capability that lets you put an auto-message at the bottom of your e-mail – typically your contact information. But many of these programs allow you to save multiple different versions of your signature. If that is the case, you have the capability to then use that signature tool as a way to quickly send repeat messages. Have you ever written an e-mail that you know you'll need to send again to another person again in the future (usually related to a question, topic, or action that comes up now and then)? You could take that e-mail text and make it an auto-signature option in your e-mail software. Then, when that issue/topic comes up again, in just a couple seconds, you can drop that signature into a new e-mail, personalize it with the recipient's name, and send as if it were an original composition. That is WAY faster than retyping from scratch, and even faster than searching your “Sent” items folder for an e-mail to reuse again in all or part. (If your e-mail doesn't allow for multiple

signatures, another option is to save the desired text in your "Drafts" folder in your e-mail account.)

9. **Use SHIFT-DELETE for Junk and/or Spam Messages.** Even if you've got a good spam filter, invariably, a junk or spam message will "run the gauntlet" and still make it to your inbox. What to do? Well, if you are a PC-based user of MS Outlook, Lotus Notes, or GroupWise, you can simply single-left-click on that message (don't double click it – that opens it!), hold down the SHIFT key, and hit Delete. When you do this, the e-mail you've selected bypasses your "Deleted Items" folder and is immediately permanently deleted – no more "double deleting" from your inbox and then your "Deleted Items" folder! (I bet I use this little gem of a tip 30-50 times a day in my MS Outlook!)
10. **Whatever You Do, Don't "Bling"!** No, this has nothing to do with modern, contemporary hip-hop culture. "Bling" instead stands for that pesky little sound your e-mail program makes to inform you that a new message has just been received. And far too many professionals I coach hear that sound, drop whatever they are doing, and jump over to check their e-mail. It is truly almost like an addiction! And, it completely derails you from being able to keep your focus and momentum, and actually get your work done. If you are ever having a day where you are having a very hard time concentrating and feel "all over the place", ask yourself how many times you've checked your e-mail/voice mail/text messages that day. I'm betting this might be the source of your addle-brained confusion! Instead, develop and follow a regimen that allows you to check your e-mail often enough to be "appropriately responsive", but yet not so much that you can't keep your focus and get your work done. Typically, for most professionals, that means 4-7 times per work day. It will make a MASSIVE difference in your productivity and work sanity.

If your e-mail has been driving you crazy, I strongly encourage you to incorporate several of the tips above into your daily e-mail habits. I know you will find extra minutes of productivity daily, which will add up to hours per week/month/year. If you like these e-mail tips, and want even more, I strongly encourage you to find out more about my book, *Taming the E-mail Beast*, as well as my related speaking/training programs on effective e-mail management, by reviewing the information below. And please feel free to share!

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