How I Tamed The Email Beast at Work—and Became More Productive

We all complain about being overwhelmed by our inboxes. Alexandra Samuel did something about it, and it made all the difference

THE DAY BEGINS WITH A NUMBER. It might be 127 or 83 or, on a good day, 58. You can ignore it for a while, figuring it won't look so daunting after you've had another cup of coffee, or gone for a run.

And yet...the inbox is always there. Waiting. And sooner or later it's got to be dealt with.

I used to live that life: the life where my workday, my productivity and my self-worth (though I hate to admit it) were tied to my success in plowing through my email. A productive day meant getting to the elusive "Inbox Zero"—reading, responding to or filing everything—even if it then meant rushing my children into bed so I could catch up on actual work and meet my deadlines. A day where I delivered a great speech or won a new client could still feel like a defeat, if it ended with my inbox still overflowing.

Then, in 2009, I got to peak email—a point where I was sending more than a thousand messages a month. I decided I was through battling my inbox day after day. Email was dominating my life, and it was time to take it back.

40% of white-collar workers spend at least three hours each weekday checking work email

Breaking free of email meant changing long-standing habits. Instead of seeing conventional messages as the simplest way to reach out to colleagues or swap important documents, I embraced new technologies that made getting in touch and collaborating more natural and less stressful. These new tools encourage you to reach out to the people you need only when you need to—eliminating pointlessly cc'ed notes—and they encourage informal messages that get right to the point and don't represent a big time commitment.

6% expect their use of work email to decline in the next two years

Today, I send half of the emails I did back at my peak, and that decline hasn't come at the cost of my productivity, professional relationships or capacity for collaboration. On the contrary, I am in closer, more productive contact with a wider range of colleagues. Once I knocked Inbox Zero off its perch as the top goal of each and every day, I was able to refocus on the tasks that are genuinely essential to professional success: writing killer reports; diving deep into data, which I can do only when I have a big chunk of uninterrupted time; and actually rehearsing my presentations, so I could rock the house.

Ditch the old standards

43% have done a self-imposed email detox, taking a break from checking email, most for fewer than four days

True, I still send and receive a huge amount of online messages during the day—but many of these are tweets or texts, and represent a much smaller fraction of my time and attention than regular email did, because the expectations are so different.

Traditional email comes along with the culture and expectations of letter writing. Chief among those expectations is the idea that you will read each message more or less when it arrives, and respond in a timely manner. That's fine for the handful of messages that actually need our attention and require a response, but many emails are sent as an FYI, a mass CC you didn't actually need to be included on, or worst of all, as a "thought you might find this link interesting." Many others are so time sensitive that by the time you read them, they're irrelevant: Put your auto-responder on for a week, and I bet that 80% of your

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inbox will be moot by the time you get back online.

That letter-writing culture just doesn't reflect the way we work today. Much of the time, when we're working with other people, we are exchanging quick, short messages in pursuit of timely responses; in that context, email is a slow and burdensome form of conversation.

A new generation of collaborative tools relieves that burden. Instead of cluttering my colleagues' inboxes with draft documents (and facing the later challenge of reconciling their edits), I circulate drafts through **Google** Drive or **Dropbox**. Instead of finding or sharing resources through email, I compile them into a digital notebook using **Evernote** or use a hashtag to share them on **Twitter** with people who will find them relevant. Instead of subscribing to email newsletters, I get industry updates by subscribing to blogs in **Feedly**, my RSS reader, where I review the news when I've got down time. And instead of emailing a bunch of people and hoping somebody will reply soon, the group-messaging tool **Slack** lets me get a quick answer from whoever is available.

When we shift to these tools, we are a lot more conversational. We operate in real time, we enjoy back-and-forth, and we let ideas unfold organically instead of summing them up as a one-page memo. And because I dive into Twitter and Slack at moments when it's convenient for me, I end up being more helpful to others, too. Unlike email, which demands an answer, the norm of group-based texting is that you only have to reply when you have something to contribute.

Changing priorities

These kinds of distributed collaboration tools aren't just faster than email. They're also more effective.

When I was still working primarily via email, I was subject to the constant distraction of incoming email notifications.

35% of white-collar workers favor email to communicate with co-workers

Even when I turned off that new-message ping, the urge to constantly check email—because that's where the action was—cut into my attention. If I tried to ignore email for a day or two in order to hit a project deadline, the resulting backlog led to long evenings of email catch-up. If I tried to keep on top of my messages, the drive to empty my inbox or address each incoming message often overwhelmed my focus on the work itself.

Now, instead of treating incoming emails as a signal of what should get my attention, I put my own professional goals and tasks first, and use collaboration tools to access the people and information I need to support each task when it's relevant and timely.

For an idea of how collaborative tools can streamline things, consider a survey I recently wrote with the help of several trusted colleagues.

In my previous life, getting that input would have required two dozen back-and-forth emails (not to mention the nightmare of tracking changes in Word). Now, it's the kind of thing I put on Google Docs—where everyone can see the draft and weigh in. I got feedback on the document itself and through social messaging, without sending or receiving a single email. When I needed the advice of one particular colleague, I sent a short text message—and got a succinct, timely reply. (If I'd emailed her, I suspect my request would have languished in her inbox.)

When I needed a second opinion—but didn't need it to be from anyone specific—I posted a question to a Slack group of about 20 people. Two replied instantly; if I had emailed 20 people (something I'd never do, because it feels intrusive) it might have taken a day or two to hear back from any of them.

And when I was ready to share the

12% in all prefer videoconferencing, video chat, instant messaging, enterprise social networks or file sharing

survey results, I didn't blast my report into a hundred inboxes, where it would likely languish. I posted it on **Medium**, **Facebook**, Twitter and **LinkedIn**, where more people will get to see it, if and when they actually want to.

Of course, even in this world of real-time, multichannel collaboration, there's a limited place for email. It's great for first contact. When I'm reaching out to someone for the first time, or making an introduction, I use email. When I need to recap and confirm the results of a face-to-face meeting or phone conversation, or map out a plan of action, email is often the most effective and concise way to get that across. When I need to ask a specific person for help or input, a concise email that begins with a short, clear (and often boldfaced) request yields the fastest, clearest results. And of course, I often send or receive emails simply to notify people of a document or task list that I've shared on the collaborative platform where we'll actually do our work.

But most of the emails I receive are still doing work that would be better handled some other way. The more we use the right tool for each purpose, the more we'll reduce our overall communications volume—and the more we can appreciate email when it serves its appropriate purpose.

Losing the record

There's only one thing I mourn about this shift from the all-purpose focus on email to the right-tool-for-the-job culture of Twitter, SMS and Slack. When I look back at my 2009 sent-mail folder, I have a record of pretty much everything I wrote, thought or read that year. Today, my life is scattered across the Internet in way that will make my work flow a lot harder to reconstruct seven years from now. But when I use my email files to look back to 2009, I see one truth that overwhelms the details of my daily work: the picture of a life ruled by an inbox from which I am now free.

3 STEPS TO FEWER EMAILS

Email liberation doesn't happen overnight. But the process of reducing the amount of time I spend on email is fairly easy and can be done in three simple steps.

Step 1: Intention

First, I decided how much time I wanted to spend on email. Setting a cap on my email time was the most difficult part of the process—and the most important. I decided I was prepared to spend about two hours a day on email, which I wanted to keep to two blocks of less than an hour each, plus a few quick check-ins throughout the day. If I have more than two extended email triage sessions a day, it crowds out essential work like writing and research, and I start to feel like I'm working for my inbox instead of vice versa. When I'm working on something that requires particular attention or focus, I set aside email until I've completed a significant chunk of work, and do one long end-of-day triage session instead of two shorter ones.

Step 2: Containment

Next, I set up email rules and filters that thinned my inbox to a volume that I could address in the amount of time I was committing to email.

These filters scan my incoming email for keywords, and use those keywords to file most messages in folders that I think of as "alternative inboxes"—folders I check once a day, once a week or (in some cases) whenever I feel like it. For example, anything that is cc'ed to me (rather than sent directly to me) gets filed in a folder that I review every day or two, in case I need to be aware of it; anything with the word "unsubscribe" gets sent to my newsletters folder, which I check once in a blue moon. Calendar invitations show up in my calendar anyway, so the emails go right to my "invites" folder, which I never need to check at all. Over time, I've winnowed my inbox to the point where any message that hits my inbox is actually something I need and want to see.

Step 3: Education

Finally, I trained my colleagues, family and friends to use more-efficient channels.

This meant letting the people in my life know how to work with (and sometimes around) my filters. When I was running my own business, my employees put the word TODAY in the subject line of any urgent message, which meant they didn't get filtered into a separate folder. My mom knew I was setting aside her emails for the end of the day, so she switched to communicating with me via text message. And most of my friends now reach out to me via **Facebook** or SMS, where our exchanges are more conversational, unfold throughout the day, and stay separate from the work-first environment of email. Because those messages are shorter than email, they're easy to keep up with, and don't begin to approach the volume or time required by email itself.

—Alexandra Samuel