CONTROL YOUR EMAIL: Time-Saving Opportunities = 81 mins/day

Research & Analysis

#1 – Re-reading emails we leave in our inbox = 27 mins/day

- Most professionals have 200 emails in their inbox[1]
- We receive 120 emails/day on average[2]. This means that if we do not archive or delete incoming emails daily, our inbox will grow by 120 each day.
- We respond to about 25% of the emails we receive[3]. If we only remove the 30 emails from our inbox we respond to, our inbox would still grow by 90 emails per day.
- On average, we check our email 15 times per day[4] or every ~37 minutes if we work the American average of 9.4 hours/day[5].
- The average email preview text is 15-20 words long[6], which takes about 4 seconds to read for someone reading at the average adult pace of 250 words per minute.
- We've assumed that every time we check our email we re-read 10% of the emails already in our inbox[7]. This based on the number of emails in our view by default and the preference for scrolling as a method of finding emails.
- By multiplying the number of emails in our inbox at every point throughout the day that we check our emails by the re-read rate (10%) and the read time (4 seconds), we calculate 26.6 minutes wasted due to re-reading

#2 – Switching costs due to checking email and attending to email notifications = 21 mins/day

- On average, we check our email 15 times per day[4] or every ~37 minutes if we work the American average of 9.4 hours/day[5].
- When interrupted by an email, it takes us on average, 64 seconds to resume our work at full attention[8]. We can assume we lose this switching cost of 64 seconds twice every

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[1] "2017-2018 State of Enterprise Work Report: U.S. Edition," Workfront (This actually represented the number of unread emails in workers' inboxes. Note: IBM Research ("Am I wasting my time organizing email? A study of email refinding") found that people had an average of 870 emails in their inbox, and this study by Pando ("The truth about email: What's a normal inbox?") on 38,000 inboxes found an average inbox size of over 8,000 messages. The point is 200 is conservative estimate.

[2] "How many emails are sent every day? And other top email statistics your business needs to know," Templafy (Sep 2017). Note: other sources suggest it is as high as 200 emails per day (Forbes: How To Stop Wasting 2.5 Hours On Email Every Day)

[3] "Most Emails Answered in Just Two Minutes, Study Finds," ABCNews (Apr 2015) based on research from Yahoo Labs

[4] "How To Stop Wasting 2.5 Hours On Email Every Day," Forbes (Jul 2017).

[5] "The "40-Hour" Workweek Is Actually Longer -- by Seven Hours," Gallup (Aug 2014).

[6] Based on manual count of words viewable in email preview text

[7] On the average laptop size, 10-15 emails are visible without any scrolling (representing 5-8% of total emails). According to a study by IBM Research, scrolling represents the most common "search" approach, making up 65% of all search attempts.

[8] Jackson, T., R. Dawson, D. Wilson. 2001b. The cost of email interruption. J. Systems Inform. Tech. 5(1) 81–92

time we check our email: once when we switch to check our email and once when we switch back to the original task

- Rather than checking our email 15 times/day, we should check it hourly, since only 11% of customers/clients and 8% of coworkers expect a response before one hour.[9] If we were to adopt this approach, we would check our email 6 fewer times per day
- If we were to check our email 6 fewer times per day, we would save 12.8 minutes in switching costs
- Further, if we receive notifications for every email we receive (120), as many do, and spend the 6 seconds required to read the average notification of 25 words (based on average adult reading speed of 250 words per minute) reading two-thirds of the notifications that come our way, we'll lose another 8 minutes

#3 – Time spent re-finding emails using suboptimal approaches = 14 mins/day

- We defer replying to messages 37% of the time[10] because we do not have enough time or information to respond at the time of reading the email, meaning that we must re-find these messages in our email application. This means we need to re-find 17 messages per day [120 x 38% of emails that are relevant to us[17] x 37% of messages that are deferred].
- On average, it takes us 70 seconds to find a message[11]
- However, searching and scrolling is 9% faster than using folders among those untrained to use email search functionality, during which it takes 4.1 searches to find the email. However, if we use built-in search operators (e.g., "from:connect@zarvana.com"), we can cut the number of searches in half, making search only take 37 seconds compared to 70[11]
- Further, if we use existing integrations between our email application and our to-do list – through which we can forward emails to our to-do list as a way of creating tasks – we can locate the body of the email in the task essentially instantaneously, and if we need to locate the original email in our email application, we can do so in just 17.2 seconds[11] using the information about the email contained in the to-do list
- We should be able to use this integration 57% of the time, since on average, 26 of our to-dos are stored in our email [26 / (120 x 38% of emails that are relevant)][12]
- By using the search method with search operators in nearly half of cases and email/to-do list integration in the other half of cases, we can save 13.8 minutes/day

#4 – Time spent archiving messages using complicated and slow approaches = 11 mins/day

[9] "How Fast Should a Business Respond to an Email?," Toister Performance Solutions, Inc. (Apr 2018)
[10] Dabbish, L.A., Kraut, R.E., Fussell, S., Kiesler, S. Understanding email use: Predicting action on a message. Proc. of CHI 2005, 691-700
[11] Whittaker, S., et. al. 2011. Am I wasting my time organizing email? A study of email refinding. IBM Research.
[12] Bellotti, V., et. al. 2004. What a To-Do: Studies of Task Management Towards the Design of a Personal Task List Manager.

- On average, we spend 10% of our total email time filing/archiving emails[13]. While studies show a range of different results, it is commonly cited that the average professional spends 2.6 hours per day on email[14]. This would mean that we spend 16 minutes filing or archiving emails every day.
- We have an average of 37 folders[15] (or "labels" as Gmail calls them)
- According to Hick's Law, our decision-making time is directly proportional to the logarithm (base 2) of the number of choices we face. This means it should take us over 5 times more time to choose between 37 folders vs. the just 2 folders we should use.
- Beyond decision-making, much of the work of archiving emails is physically moving emails to the right folders. Using a mouse and menu or toolbar icons takes an average of 2.65 seconds vs. the 1.36 seconds it takes to use the keyboard shortcuts to execute common computer operations[16].
- Assuming that 70% of filing time is spent making decisions and 30% physically moving emails, we can save a total of 11.2 minutes per day, with 8.9 and 2.3 minutes saved in each area respectively.

#5 – Reading and processing emails that are irrelevant = 8 mins/day

- We receive 120 emails/day on average[2], of which as many as 62% are irrelevant to us and can be processed in bulk[17]
- It takes us an average of 3.2 seconds to delete an email and over 80% of emails are deleted in under 3 seconds[18]
- On average, we open 20% of emails[19] and spend 15-20 seconds reading emails sent by permission mailers (i.e., subscription-based emails), the kind that are likely to be irrelevant or at least not important to us[20]
- If 62% of our emails are irrelevant and we spend an average of 17.5 seconds reading each of 20% of those irrelevant emails and 3.2 seconds deleting the other 80%, we lose 7.5 minutes per day to irrelevant emails

Want to put this time back in your life?

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[13] Bellotti, V., Ducheneaut, N., Howard, M., Smith, I., & Grinter, R. Quality vs. quantity: Email-centric task management and its relationship with overload. Human-Computer Interaction, 20(1-2), 2005, 89-138
[14] The social economy: Unlocking value and productivity through social technologies. McKinsey Global Institute. (Jul 2012)
[15] "The truth about email: What's a normal inbox?" Pando. (Apr 2013).
[16] Lane, D., Napier, A. H., Peres, C. S., Sandor, A. "Hidden Costs of Graphical User Interfaces: Failure to Make the Transition from Menus and Icon Toolbars to Keyboard Shortcuts." International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction 18(2), 133-144 (2005).
[17] "Email Overload: Research and Statistics," SaneBox (Feb 2016)
[18] "Insights from 5 Million Emails," Boomerang
[19] "The Science Behind Email Open Rates (and How to Get More People to Read Your Emails)," SuperOffice (Jul 2018)
[20] "Alarming Research Results: Average Email Open Time is 15-20 Seconds," EmailLabs via Marketing Sherpa (Jan 2005)