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# Special Report

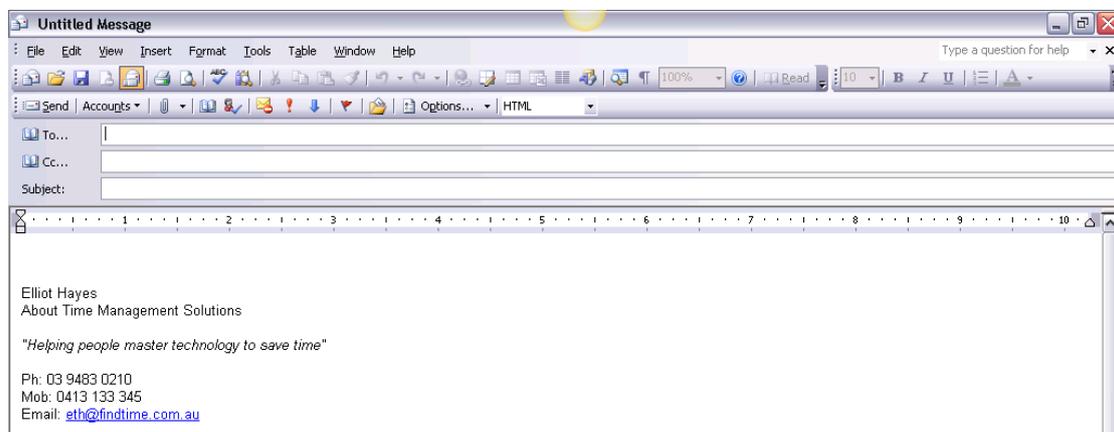
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## How to manage your email and increase your productivity by up to 20%

By Elliot Hayes

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## Take back control...

If you're reading this, then it can help you join the growing number of people who are taking back control of their productivity in the face of a major challenge - email. The overload of email is draining the productivity of our workforce. But the good news is there are ways to deal with this challenge, and they're simple to apply. All they require is a willingness to learn and some practise.

This introductory report is designed to teach you some basic strategies which you can apply *immediately* to managing email to increase your productivity.

We're going to cover:

- The biggest, time wasting mistake that most people make with email and how to avoid it
- The four step process of how to deal with *any* email to save you time, energy and focus

These two simple strategies can dramatically improve your productivity. But to get maximum benefit they also require a certain mindset. You need to be constantly asking yourself:

"How can I improve my results? How can I get more out of the day without stressing myself too much?"

Don't let yourself get too overwhelmed by your environment. It's amazing to me how many people persist with energy draining, time wasting processes without trying to find an easier way.

To date, I and my colleagues have helped over five thousand people deal with this productivity issue, and the biggest benefit they feed back to us is a greater sense of control over their work.

This simple report on the challenge of email management is one step towards helping you achieve that.

## **A brief overview**

### **Remember the good old days...**

Remember the time when people relied upon picking up the phone to discuss issues? When “snail mail” was relied upon to write to others?

Just two years ago, I was sitting in a meeting with one of the senior managers of Australia Post when he stated, “If I could ban email from our office, I would.” Now, he wasn’t saying that because he saw email as being in competition with Australia Post (although I guess it’s possible). Rather, he was in despair that staff communication was suffering as people continually resorted to email to discuss issues and relay information.

### **Something is missing here...**

Like it or not, email is here to stay. It’s doubling every six months, and if you don’t learn to manage it effectively your productivity is going to plummet. Some people spend *all day* going through their emails.

But email has shown us something very interesting. It has highlighted a major weakness in our workforce – many people lack the principles of time management and an ability to *integrate* those principles with technology.

Time management principles are terrific, but unless you can apply them to the tool you’re working with (such as Microsoft Outlook, Lotus Notes, or a PDA) – then the benefit is marginal.

In other words, our workforce is being dominated by technology rather than making it *serve them*. Remember how one of the major aims of technology was to *save us time*. And in some areas it has. But in the case of email what it has really done is make each individual a target for more information to be thrown at them *twenty four seven*.

The best part is that thanks to an increasingly litigious society, and a few notable corporations going bust, it’s becoming your responsibility to keep these emails just as you would financial records. That way, when the auditors come they have a clean trail to follow so they know who to blame.

In the wake of all these companies crashing, the USA has implemented tough legislation regarding the storage of email, voicemail and sms texts. That means that the information in a three year old email must be easily retrievable upon request. Australia is already facing the same issue.

*So you’re simply walking targets, and it’s your responsibility. Let’s look at the specific strategies we can use to manage email effectively and increase our productivity by up to twenty percent.*

**Strategy number one:**

**Never, ever, ever, ever, ever store your emails in the inbox *after* you have read them.**

Imagine you get home from work and you go to the mail box. Let's say there are five letters the post man has dropped off for you (most of them are bills). You pull them out of the mail box and open them up,

As you read them, you quickly decide which letter to throw in the bin (not recommended with your bills, they'll just keep mailing you) and which ones you want to keep.

Let's say you throw two of them in the bin, and you have three letters remaining that you need to keep.

Now let me ask you a question.

***Do you put those three letters back in the mail box?***

Of course not! That would be silly. If you did that, you would have trouble finding them again, the post man wouldn't be able to fit tomorrow's letters in the mail box, it wouldn't make sense.

Yet what do ninety five percent of people do after they read an email? Answer: they leave it in the in-box. They'll deal with it later. Now this is fine if you have about five emails in your inbox. But an email takes up only one line of text on your computer screen, which means it can build up very quickly. Before you know it, you have thirty, fifty, one hundred, two hundred emails sitting in your inbox. Just glancing at them gives you a headache.

**The biggest inbox I ever saw!**

The most I've ever seen with a client is 12,000 emails sitting in their inbox. She was part of the finance team in the company, and she wanted to keep every email "just in case" she needed it.

Do you think she might waste time she doesn't need to just trying to find the emails?

What I want you to do is treat your inbox as if it's your own personal receptionist. The receptionist greets all the visitors in the lobby, and then tells them where they need to go. They direct the traffic. But they don't want all the visitors staying in the lobby with them because it gets too crowded.

It's the same deal with your inbox. If you leave your emails in your inbox, what happens is it gets very crowded very quickly. You might be familiar with the message, "You have no space, please delete files to make new space." That's because you don't have a system of clearing your emails out regularly.

## **Beware of a big time waster**

This brings us to one of the biggest time wasters related to email. What happens when you need to find that email again? Well, you start scrolling through your inbox (which by now is pretty full) looking for it. For some of you *trying to find information* is draining your time the most and can be very frustrating.

Also, have you noticed how many people don't know how to put a descriptive heading on their emails? So when you're trying to find it, the heading is often not a good indicator of what the actual email is about. All you have to go on is the "rough date" it was sent, and the name of the sender – but it gets messy and it's time wasting.

So by now you're probably asking, "If I don't store emails in the inbox, then where do I put them?"

Well, I'm glad you asked. Now is the time to discuss a very powerful four step process...

### **Strategy number two:**

#### **A simple process for managing emails as they come into your inbox**

When an email comes in, there's one of four actions you can take with it. You can:

- deal with it straightaway
- put it in the bin
- give it to someone else
- get to it later
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(By the way, whenever I ask my clients in a workshop what they can do with an email, they all give the same answer loud and clear - DELETE IT! Unfortunately, you can't always do that.)

Now, let's cover these in more detail:

***Deal with the email straight away*** – well, you already know how to do that one. If you have time, and you can do it, then that's great. It's done and you can get on with the next task.

***Delete the email*** – I suspect you're very well practised with this one. You've checked it out, got what you need and now you're happy to trash it!

***Give it to someone else*** – now, if you're in the position of being able to do this, it's very handy. The issue of tracking what you have delegated is a whole lesson in itself (and forms part of the performance management of your team). However, some of you don't have the authority to delegate to someone else.

***Get to it later*** – now this one is the real key. When you defer an email, you're putting it off until a later time. For most people, their way of doing this is to leave the email in the inbox but, as we've discussed, that can be ineffective.

In deferring an email, you have two issues to consider:

- ***When*** will you action the email?
- ***Where*** will you store the email in the meantime?

Now, the two main software programs used in corporate Australia to receive email are Microsoft Outlook and Lotus Notes. You may use a different program, but what I'm about to show you will work on most applications.

In these programs, you have the folder entitled:

**"Tasks" or "To Do List"**

Any email you receive that requires you to *do* something should be put in the tasks folder. When you do that, it also gives you a chance to nominate *when* you will do it.

\*A little tip - when you enter the heading for the task, be as descriptive as possible so that you can know what it's referring to at a glance.

So by transferring the email to the "Tasks" folder, the email will be taken out of the inbox and placed where it won't be forgotten.

This means:

- you don't need to waste time searching for the email in the inbox
- you don't need to remind yourself to take care of it
- you can even set the reminder bell on the task entry to remind you when to do it (don't do this for all of them or it will be ringing every two minutes)
- you're one step closer to an inbox that is *almost* empty
- you can even attach a priority on the task entry so you know *in what order of* importance you have to follow up on it

**Emails you want to keep "just in case" you need them**

Now, what about all those emails you want to keep "just in case" you need to access them again? Well, they can go straight to a subfolder just for storing information. In fact, if you're getting a lot of "CC Mail", you can set up a "CC Mail" subfolder to automatically store them.

Then, when you next have a coffee break, you can go through the CC Mail to catch up on the information you've been sent. But truthfully, 85% of the emails we are cc'd on require no action at all.

**This applies to every email you're sent**

From now on, every time you receive an email, instead of leaving it in the inbox, you can ask yourself:

- Can I delete it?
- Can I delegate it to someone else?
- Can I deal with it now?
- Can I get to it later by putting it in the tasks folder?

**Email Protocol**

Email is still very new for some of us, and we're still figuring out the rules as we go along. One suggestion that will help your organisation is to create a list of email protocols.

It can include areas like when *not* to send an email, how to address it, no use of capital letters since it comes across as shouting (don't assume anything when it comes to what people actually know about email protocol).

Most importantly, you put in place the expectations of what is appropriate for the usage of email and what is not.

These are areas that – if adopted company wide – will help the overall management of email for all the staff. This is critical for achieving a gain in your productivity across the whole organisation (and its stakeholders).

### **Finally...**

Obviously, there are a whole lot more techniques you can use in managing your productivity with Outlook or Lotus Notes (or whatever email tool you use). That needs a whole workshop to cover. But hopefully you can see the benefit of applying this simple process to every email that is sent to you.

If you find yourself improving your management of email with any of these techniques (or you create your own) then by all means share your helpful hints with your colleagues. The more an office is effectively using email, the more productive it will be.

Lastly, if you're reading this and have any further queries or feedback, then feel free to send me an email (I know, it's a good chance for me to practise what I preach). I'd be happy to help with any queries you have, and I'd love to hear whether this has been of any help.

Til I hear from you next – good luck.

Warmest regards,

Elliot Hayes

### **P.S Want to learn more?**

If you would like to discuss these concepts further, or exchange other ideas about how to boost productivity, by all means send us an email at [eth@findtime.com.au](mailto:eth@findtime.com.au)

### **Want to see a “Free Preview” of one of our courses?**

For a free tutorial demonstration of how you can manage your email using the tool of Microsoft Outlook, click on [www.findtime.com.au/manage-your-email](http://www.findtime.com.au/manage-your-email)

You will see the strategies we talk about in this report applied in real life. It will give you ideas you can use immediately to help improve your productivity.

About the author:

*Elliot Hayes has worked across seven different industries – ranging from telecommunications to film and television to corporate training and development. It was during his tenure as manager of one of the top Optus franchises in Australia that he began to develop his skills as a trainer and educator. He has been running training programs in productivity for over four years, specialising in how to combine technology with time management principles for the maximum benefit. He has featured in BRW, and his clients have included Australia Post, Telstra, Department of Justice, and Optus.*

*Elliot also consults and trains in the areas of innovation in the workplace, sales and marketing. He is also a qualified tai chi instructor. If you would like to give any feedback or contact Elliot to exchange ideas on how to improve productivity, then email [eth@findtime.com.au](mailto:eth@findtime.com.au)*

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