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Taming Your Email: Tips from Productivity Guru David Allen

David Allen is an international author, lecturer, and founder and President of the David Allen Company, a management consulting, coaching, and training company. He is the author of the best-selling book, [Getting Things Done: the Art of Stress-Free Productivity](#).

A big challenge these days for the more "wired" of us is how to organize and manage the flood of email messages that we need to handle on a daily basis. My clients range from the "just getting started" to execs at Microsoft and Oracle, with 300+ emails a day, non-stop.

In one respect, email is no different than an in-basket or an answering machine—it's just a collection box for communication that needs to be assessed, processed, and organized as appropriate. But in many ways, email is suffering from the same challenges as a low-tech in-basket—too much stuff that we don't have the time or inclination to process and organize as it comes in. So it becomes the swampish breeding ground of "staged" items—read but not decided upon. (I have uncovered as many as 5,000 emails still festering in a client's "in" mail.)

If your volume and processing speed leave you consistently with less than one screen-full of emails at any one time, you're probably still within the alive, conscious, and sane range. If you have more than that, you're dangerously subject to stress and numb-out relative to the new and exciting electronic/digital Valhalla.

TIPS

Create a sufficient **archive** file folder library within your email program so you can rapidly drag emails that you just want to save for future reference into those folders. Purge them at least yearly to keep them conscious and give you the freedom to keep anything that strikes your fancy.

Hold to the **2-minute rule**. Read and respond, delete or file emails that can be dispatched in 2 minutes or less. This is a powerful habit, and more so as your volume of email grows.

Create **actionable** folders for emails that require more than 2 minutes of focus, and make them visually distinct from your reference folders. If your email program shows your folders alphabetically (as MS Mail), then create at least: @Action and @Waiting For.

The "@" sign will put them at the top of your folder list (so you are reminded that they are different from just reference, and that you need to look at them regularly). Then you have to decide:

1. Will I use the contents of the folder itself to remind me that I need to do something with/about that email? Or 2. Will I record the action of responding to that email in my organization system?

If (1), then you'd better open that folder at least once every day, so you do not let anything slip. If (2), you have the extra task of tracking the action item in your system, but you don't need to review the email folder—you just have it there if you need the original email for future replies.

If you delegate a lot of items by email, then you will want to create copies of those emails and store them for review in your @Waiting For folder. Unfortunately, most of the major email programs require that you blind copy yourself (bcc) on those emails and then as they pop back into your email in-basket, you can drag that into your Waiting For folder.

If you are trustworthy in using your email program as a working reminder tool of what you still need to do or finish, then you might want to get more discreet in some categories of actionable emails. For example: @Read/Review is a good category folder for those emails that you've been cc'd on, are more than a 2-minute read, or that you're pretty sure you don't have to do anything about, you just want to read—Good stuff for reading while waiting for meetings to start.

The tips above are a starting point for devising a system for taming your email. Experiment with various combinations to find what works for you.

David Allen is the author of [Getting Things Done](#). Find out more about him at www.davidco.com.