Ten email Commandments

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There have never been so many ways to get things done – or so many distractions. This is the ultimate guide to mastering the technology that rules our lives

1. Email is your servant

Corner-office people have secretaries to prevent them being interrupted. They take incoming calls and turn them into written records. They fend off time-wasters. They create blocks of unbroken time during which real work can be done. Email will do all this for you too – and while I am a Gmail user, most modern email programs or services should allow you to do likewise.

First, switch off most, if not all, notifications: the blinking red light on the BlackBerry, the little icon in the corner of the screen, the automated email telling you that someone has mentioned you on Twitter. Most websites, apps, devices and software programs will have a "settings" section and, with that, a "notifications". If you can't find it, Google it. Switch 'em off.

You might make an exception for rare events: once a week or so, someone I already know will try to send a private message to me on Twitter. I have told Twitter to send me an email when this happens, but I don't need a little blinking light to tell me that someone has sent me an email. Unless the End Times Are At Hand, someone has always just sent me an email. I'll answer when I am ready.

Your phone can prevent interruptions too: a voicemail message can politely ask people to text or email you. Presto: instant personal assistant. Whenever you have finished what you were actually intending to do, fire up your email. Emails form a permanent, searchable record. Consult that record at a time convenient to you.

2. Don't bother filing your emails – archive them

Back in the day, people would file their old emails in folders. Gmail popularised the idea of a catch-all Archive: the equivalent of dumping all your documents in a wheelie bin beside your desk and rooting around in there if you ever need to find anything. If your email program doesn't have a default archive like Gmail, it's easy to achieve a similar effect: just create one folder for yourself marked "Archive" and dump anything you might vaguely wish to see again into that folder.

Perhaps this sounds insane. Trust me. The difference between a modern email archive and a wheelie bin is that the archive is searchable. If you've ever googled a document that you now have in your filing cabinet, you've realised the basic idea: search is now so good it is usually quicker to search for something in an undifferentiated archive than it is to find the folder where you painstakingly filed it.

I am serious about this. You do not need to waste time with elaborate folder systems. Forget about them. I use folders only for very specific projects. For instance, I often find myself agreeing to speak at conferences or book festivals, and it can be handy to use a single sub-folder to store all the emails relevant to a particular gig. When the event is finished, I drag the whole sub-folder into a folder marked "Past Events" and it will never distract me again.

More often than not, though, folder structures become unwieldy; choosing the right folder into which to drop an email becomes an extended exercise in thumb-sucking taxonomy, and finding it again becomes impossible.

Why bother? A fine research paper with the title "Am I Wasting My Time Organizing Email?" by Steve Whittaker and others at IBM Research concluded that, broadly, yes, you are. The researchers collected digital data from 345 users of an email program over several weeks. They found that an email search typically takes about 15 seconds, while a hunt through folders takes about a minute. (Some users also just scrolled up and down their inboxes; typically it took about 30 seconds to find an email!) Just to be clear: it took four times as long to find emails using the painstaking-to-set-up system than it did using the "archive and forget" system. Nor were "filers" any more likely to find the email they were looking for than "searchers".

How to be an email sociopath! If you'd like to really aggravate a busy person, send them an email with an attachment saying "please see the attached letter", and add no elaboration. This is a three-for-one communication catastrophe. First, you are impersonating the behaviour of someone trying to spread a virus. Second, your message is hard to read on a phone and, on some systems, is not searchable. Third, you're slowing everything down. This isn't a children's treasure hunt, where each message points to the next message. It's a failed attempt to communicate with a busy person.

Of course, if attachments are your style, why not embed all the details in an image in the style of a fancy invitation? This plan has it all: a large, non-searchable file, practically impossible to read on a smartphone and requiring a mortgage to download if abroad. Whatever your event is, I guarantee that it's worth missing if this is how you choose to announce it.

Alternatively, you could put vital information – rather than supporting material – on the web behind a password, and send me a link to click on. I love trying to remember passwords; typing them in on a smartphone is a source of great joy, and the fear that I am responding to a phishing attack just adds to the excitement. You might think that nobody would be insane enough to try to communicate like this; if so I'd be happy to introduce you to some of my colleagues at the Financial Times.

Gmail users might even treat themselves to the "Send and Archive" feature; you can enable it by going to Gmail's settings. It adds a single, handy button which sends your reply, archives your email and returns you to your inbox, all in one click. It's addictive. Emails just vanish.

3. Process your email inbox – and empty it

Let me just take a quick break to check on my email inbox. I'll be right back …

… I'm back. There was one email. Now there's none. I have become increasingly convinced that sanity depends on keeping your inbox as empty as possible, checking it several times a day (but not several times an hour) and dealing promptly with everything that lurks there.

This doesn't mean letting your inbox jerk you around on a string – it is all too easy to allow other people's priorities to run your day. But most incoming email can be processed very quickly without interrupting what really matters.

How? Productivity prophet Merlin Mann points out that there are only five things you can do with an email: delete it, delegate it, reply to it, defer it or take some more substantial action.

Some email is obviously crap and can be deleted without being read. If it's crap from a reputable source, rather than a fake Viagra merchant, check to see if there's a one-click unsubscribe, or consider setting up a quick filter: any worthwhile email system will let you automatically block emails from a particular sender, often with just a click or two.

Other emails need to be read but can then be processed almost instantly. If the email is about a meeting that you'll attend, write the meeting in your calendar (electronic or otherwise) – and then hit "Archive" to get rid of the email. If you can make a decision, make it quickly and reply. (Perhaps you are worried about seeming perfunctory; that's less of a problem now that so many emails are sent from phones. In any case, a brief response will often be excused if it is prompt.) Or quickly delegate the task. If the email is "for information", read it, then archive it.

Then, of course, there are the emails that require something more time-consuming. And unless you want to drop everything to respond, that means deferring the action until later. Don't leave the email in your inbox. You should either be moving it to an "action" folder, or archiving it and noting the action on a To Do list that you trust. (Pen and paper isn't a bad choice.)

Does that seem like a purely cosmetic change, designed to keep your inbox looking clean but simply shovelling the problem somewhere else? It isn't. Here's why: if you leave genuine "To Do" items in your inbox, your inbox will become your To Do list. That's not good, because anyone can get in your face and on your To Do list just by sending you an email. And the functionality you might want in a To Do list – setting repeat tasks, deadlines and priorities – simply isn't built into a traditional inbox. So when I say there are no emails in my inbox, I don't mean that I've done everything. I'm just using a less dysfunctional system of recording what I haven't yet done.

4. Five emails are sometimes better than one

Let's switch to the viewpoint of the email sender: how to send emails that will make the recipient want to hug you rather than strangle you with a cable? Oddly, sometimes it is more helpful to send lots of emails rather than a single one.

Say I'm coming to visit you on a business trip. You need me to do five things: sign a form, send a document, arrange a flight, confirm dietary requirements and arrange a pre-trip phone call. In most cases I would prefer to receive five separate emails, because these are tasks I can tick off one by one. Decking out your email with different requests like a Christmas tree has the advantage of putting everything in one place but the risk is that you will hear nothing until everything is done. (The exception: at some point before the trip I'm going to love you if you send me an email with all the relevant details together in one place.)

5. Use filters – a bit

Most email systems allow you to block emails from certain senders in a matter of seconds. If you get a lot of unsolicited email (my curse is poorly targeted press releases) then you may find it's worth getting into the habit of using filters – little rules that your email program will use to delete them automatically. If you can't figure out how to set up a filter on your email program, just put the question into Google: that will find the answer for you.

Some people use more elaborate filters – for instance, using the full functions of their email systems to presort emails by subject and sender. I am not convinced. If an email is not useful enough to be worth a glance as it arrives, perhaps you should be unsubscribing from it anyway. Vouchers, notifications from Facebook, newsgroup digests – this sort of not-quite-Spam is often called "Bacn" (which is not an acronym but simply a way of spelling "bacon" with four letters). Bacon is tastier than spam; it's nevertheless bad for you.

Favourite websites

Merlin Mann's 43folders.com is a brilliant resource for getting on top of email. It is now largely dormant, which is an advantage: too many sites frantically bombard you with "productivity porn" which you read instead of, ahem, being productive.

One such is Lifehacker.com, a great resource if you want to find the latest list of, for instance, "To Do" smartphone apps. But with updates every half an hour, the possibility of temptation is all too obvious.

My favourite To Do list is Remember The Milk, a website and phone app. There are newer apps out there but one can fiddle too much with these things. I use Delicious for online bookmarks (the Android app is Andricious) and Dlvr.it to turn those bookmarks into tweets.

6. Smile – it's all on the record

Be nice. You never know who will get to read your email – the jury at your fraud trial; the NSA; your partner; your boss. Email lasts indefinitely and can be forwarded instantly – helpful when sharing information. But it is also dangerous: dangerous for evasive managers, insider traders and fraudsters. You are none of those things and need not fear leaving a permanent record; that is because you are always, always, nice.

7. Smartphones are habit-forming, so think about the habits you want to form

Don't get me wrong: I love my smartphone. But because it's always there within easy reach, it's a constant temptation and it's habit-forming. I've seen very impressive people reduced to rude, babbling imbeciles because they can't stop themselves from being distracted by their phones. (This is another good reason to keep your inbox empty – a stuffed inbox is like a scab to be picked away at on the smartphone when you could be reading a good book. And while it can be handy to reply to emails while waiting for a bus, smartphones have pretty inefficient keyboards.)

What to do? One possibility is complete abstinence. Another is periodic fasting. Many travellers have marvelled at how much they get done on long-distance flights, where it remains very difficult to distract oneself with the internet. Tom Chatfield, author of Netymology, points out that anyone can simulate such a flight by switching your devices to "airplane" mode for a few hours. Instant isolation from the internet. Illustrations by Alberto Antoniazzi depicting email and social media©Alberto Antoniazzi

A less drastic approach is simply to recognise that your smartphone will demand your attention and checking it will become a habit. Think, then, about what it is that you want to become habitual. Checking email seems harmless to me if you are good at responding or deleting. Checking Twitter or Facebook might work for some but it's not a habit I want.

I've set up my smartphone so that I can check my favourite blogs – I use Feedly with the GReader app – and I quickly fire off a tweeted recommendation if I see something I like. The side effect: I can tweet a lot without firing up Twitter, which means I am less likely to become distracted. In short, the phone is set up so that I can produce social media but not consume them. I can use apps such as Readability to catch up on longer articles I bookmarked earlier, and am a voracious listener to podcasts. But I couldn't check Twitter on my phone if I wanted to – and I don't want to, because smartphones are all about habit, and this is one I've prevented myself from acquiring.

8. Embrace the imperfect To Do list

The thing to understand about To Do lists is that they're very powerful but not very complicated.

I find it useful to distinguish between three kinds of task. There's the stuff that is going to need to be done in due course but not now – my columns; my accounts. Then there's the stuff that doesn't need doing now, or at any particular time, but needs noting down so I don't forget. Then there's the stuff I was hoping to do today.

The only firm principle with To Do lists is not to let these different kinds of task get in each other's way. Here's what works well for me: I use a digital task manager to store tasks that repeat, or tasks with a distant deadline, or "sometime" tasks. (There are lots of choices, such as Any.Do, Todoist and Remember The Milk, many of which will synchronise between a web-based interface and your smartphone.) But the practical list of stuff I am actually trying to get done right now is on a piece of paper with the two or three things I am determined to do at the top, and a random brain-dump of other tasks that will be added to over the course of the day. At the end of the day, I rewrite the list so that it's ready to use the next morning. Anything that keeps on being postponed probably needs to disappear from that list. I know; it's a dead tree. How quaint.

Writing stuff on your To Do list that you've already done, just for the satisfaction of crossing it off? That's entirely legitimate. The To Do list is not just a prompt; it is a record of achievement.

9. How to deal with social media

Social media – Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus+ and the rest – are in flux for a simple enough reason: they're all terrible.

Facebook is intolerable; even if there were no concerns about privacy and advertising, it would still be intolerable: the site is a clunky, capricious mess. Twitter is fun but flawed. Try following a discussion or argument, or searching for an interesting link someone tweeted a few days ago, and see how easy you find it.

My own record with social media is mixed. I have a Facebook page that automatically takes content from my website; I don't pay much attention to it.

I have a decent Twitter following – the population of a small town – but I don't check Twitter much because it's just too wonderfully distracting. (I mentioned before that I tweet a lot while reading blogs on my phone. I don't actually log into Twitter to do so. I use Dlvr.it to automatically post anything I bookmark on Delicious at 15-minute intervals. This has the side effect of making my tweets taggable and searchable.)

Despite Google's attempts to kill it, I'm a huge fan of RSS – a simple way to follow your favourite websites. You don't need to wait for something to "go viral"; you follow your chosen writers free of charge and without delay. Occasionally someone asks me how I find so many wonderful things to tweet about. The answer is simple: the RSS feed of a few good blogs. (If you don't know what RSS is or how it works, just look it up.)

10. And finally …

All this is a work in progress. I struggle daily to take my own advice and constantly distract myself with nonsense. And is any of this advice right for you? Your job description, colleagues and home life are different. You are different. Figure out what advice I should have given you, and do that instead.

GLOSSARY

Archive (n): in Gmail, a catch-all place where your emails go unless you specifically put them somewhere else.

Archive (v): to make an email disappear from your inbox in a single click, without deleting it or fiddling around with some complicated filing system.

Bacn: email that you signed up to receive but that isn't really a personal communication – newsletters, automatic notifications from Facebook and similar. It's usually easy to unsubscribe, and you probably should.

Filter: an automatic rule that your email software uses to sort emails into various folders – including the trash.

Folder: a quaint digital throwback to the days when we didn't have powerful search functions for email, and therefore needed to devote vast energies to ensuring we knew exactly where we'd put it.

Gmail: a popular web-based email application provided by Google. Other email systems are available and all the good ones will let you do similar things.

Google it: if anything I've said confuses you, type "how do I . . ." into Google and you'll be surprised how helpful the answers tend to be.

Notifications: ways in which your email, phone and social networks interrupt you when you are doing something else. There's almost always a way to switch them off. Find it.

RSS: stands for Rich Site Summary, or Really Simple Syndication. Allows a program or website called an RSS reader – the most famous is probably Feedly – to track updates to your favourite blogs in a manner reminiscent of email.