How to stay on top of an overwhelming email inbox

Inbox Zero

David M Sibley
Inbox Zero

Merlin Mann

- Your time is valuable
- Address email one by one using a focused set of actions
- Process to zero

Inbox Zero

Merlin Mann


- **Delete**
  - Is this email relevant to me?
- **Delegate**
  - Am I the best person to handle this?
- **Respond**
  - Can I respond in two minutes or less?
- **Defer**
  - Will this take longer than two minutes?
- **Do**
  - Can I complete the task in two minutes?
“Seven things to do. Number one: Banking.”
“Number two: pick up dr--”
“Ok, you just knocked over an old lady.”
“Keep moving, you’ve got seven things to do!”
Inbox Zero

“It’s about how to reclaim your email, your attention, and your life. That “zero?” It’s not how many messages are in your inbox—it’s how much of your own brain is in that inbox. Especially when you don’t want it to be. That’s it.”

– Merlin Mann
Why is email overwhelming?
“It takes people on average about 25 minutes to reorient back to a task when they get interrupted”

– Gloria Mark

Table 2. Mean and SD of window duration (in seconds) and frequency of window switches (switches/hour in which data were collected) for each participant.
The digital environment is just an extension of the real world.
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Organize!

- Optimize making as few context switches as possible
- “Search” has no context
- Communication is messy, you can not automate everything
Step 1: De-clutter your inbox!
Retaining Context

Solve 3 cases:

- **Past**
  - I need to be able to refer to this
- **Present**
  - I am currently working on this
- **Future**
  - I am waiting on a response
Past: Notifications vs. Correspondence

- Newsletters
- Outages/Helpdesk
- JIRA/Github
- Email lists
- One-on-one
- Calendar invites
- Reply needed
Retaining Context:
Present

- Use hierarchical labels
  - What does this mean to me?
- Bisect audience top-down:
  - Work vs. Personal
  - External vs. UW
  - Campus vs. College
  - Department vs. rest of College
  - Group vs. rest of Department
  - Me vs. rest of Group
- Create project-specific labels going bottom-up
Step 2: Live your life
Reduce duration of email breaks

- Piecemeal add new filters for **notifications**
- 2 Factor Filtering
  - From
  - “Unsubscribe”
Reduce frequency of email breaks

- Check for correspondence three times a day
- Choose if you want to be interrupted on replies
  - Flagged messages filter
  - Fingerprint in signature
Build a habit

- If I’ve learned anything from software development, nothing is more permanent than small mediocre changes applied frequently on top of each other.

- Separate **notifications** from actual **correspondence**
- Focus on retaining **context**
- **Choose** if you want to be interrupted
Thanks!

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- Merlin’s Inbox Zero Talk:  
- Fantastic in depth look into use cases:  
  https://blog.hubspot.com/service/inbox-zero
- Gloria Mark’s research:  
- And this exists, but I haven’t tried it:  
  http://boomerangapp.com/