

# Getting to inbox zero and keeping it that way



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IT'S so easy to send email that we find our email inbox fills up fairly quickly; many of us have our email software open throughout the day and have it set to alert us of incoming messages immediately. Email is my main source of work communication so it's essential for me to manage this to enable myself and my colleagues to work effectively.

One of the main principles of David Allen's Getting Things Done system is the importance of clearing your mind so that you can focus on getting things done. The theory is that if you have numerous emails in your inbox, you won't be able to focus. Some people like to use their email inbox as a to-do list to remind them what they need to do. The problem with this however is that new emails arrive into your inbox and it's difficult to ignore those whilst you're working through your tasks. Ideally, your inbox should be kept clear ready for incoming emails, and then cleared on a regular basis by sorting them into their relevant places. There's a whole host of articles about this topic, usually tagged with the term 'inbox zero' as coined by Merlin Mann.

## Getting to inbox zero

As tempting as it might be to hit the select all and delete button, by following some simple rules you can get to inbox zero relatively simply.

- 1 Dedicate time to sorting, not doing – this time is purely to get your inbox clear, not to complete any tasks.
- 2 Set up places to store your emails. Depending on your email software these may be folders, labels or tags (or a combination). You'll need somewhere for the following types of information:
  - a Delete
  - b Delegate
  - c Respond
  - d Defer
  - e Do
- 3 Work through your inbox systematically, as if it was a physical inbox – deal with every item in

## Getting things done

order (oldest first). If an item can be dealt with in less than two minutes (e.g. responding to simple queries, forwarding information, delegating a simple task) you might want to do it, otherwise move it to its relevant place for future action.

Once you've cleared your inbox, you can focus on your tasks knowing that there are no urgent emails that you aren't aware of. There are a number of different email clients and mobile applications that can help you process your email efficiently – Mailbox for iOS is a popular one at the moment.

## Maintaining inbox zero

It's unlikely that your email will stay empty for long. Each time you check your email from now on, you'll want to process all your incoming mail and get back to inbox zero each time. Again, if something takes less than two minutes you could do it whilst processing, but if it will take longer than this move it to your action list/folder.

## Other email tips

- When sending email, keep each email to one topic/project if possible. This makes it much easier for the person to process the email and respond to any requests, and

helps keep conversation threads manageable.

- Consider whether email is the most appropriate medium – sometimes it may be more appropriate to discuss over the phone or face-to-face.
- Think about the purpose of the email and consider what you want to say before writing. This can help keep it focused and concise.
- Use rules to help you process your emails, for example to add labels to emails from a certain email address.
- When working on a task that demands your attention, try closing your email software or turning off alerts. You could set an alarm to remind you to check every so often, but having the alerts come through as email arrives can be very distracting. [1]

## Links and resources

- **Merlin Mann's Inbox Zero video:** <http://inboxzero.com/video/>
- **Inbox Zero articles:** <http://inboxzero.com/articles/>
- **Lifehacker blog posts about inbox zero:** <http://lifelife.com/tag/inbox-zero>
- **Mailbox (iOS app to help you process email):** [www.mailboxapp.com](http://www.mailboxapp.com)
- **Mailstrom (a tool to help you analyse your email habits and get to inbox zero):** <https://mailstrom.co>



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