

Trim the F.A.T. - How to Conquer the E-Mail Pile-Up

By Kathy Paauw

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Although I do not believe e-mail will ever entirely replace our paper-based systems, it has rapidly grown in popularity to the point that my clients complain of drowning in e-mail as much as they do in paper. I offer suggestions to help you manage it all.

Be Clear About Your Purpose for Logging On

First, you must be clear about your PURPOSE for logging on, and then stick to it! With the many "click here" links, it's easy to get lost in the links and forget why you ever logged on in the first place. Stay focused and don't allow yourself to get derailed. Or, if you choose to surf the Net, set a timer and limit the amount of time you spend going from one link to the next. Time can fly by without you even realizing it.

Organize It!

Next, set up a simple EMAIL FOLDER system to help you manage everything in your account. As with paper, there are only three things you can do with an e-mail message: FILE it - store for future reference in the appropriate e-mail folder
ACT on it - read it, reply to it, forward it, or follow up with an action requested of you
TOSS it - delete the e-mail from your server

As I go through my e-mail, I treat it as if I were opening hard-copy mail, using the process outlined above. If I am not going to read it or act on it right now, I move it to one of two folders: ACTION REQUIRED, or ACTION REQUIRED-READ. I have created folders with these names because I want them up near the top, and the program I use (Outlook Express) alphabetizes the folders. If I were to call the second folder READ, it would be toward the bottom of my list, and I want my action items toward the top where I can

see them better.

If the action required is a quick action and I have time to deal with it at the moment (a quick reply to a question, for example), I might "act" on it right then. If I do not have time, I move it out of my INBOX and into ACTION REQUIRED. Or, if the action is to read it and I don't have time to read it then, I move it out of my INBOX and into ACTION REQUIRED-READ. I block out time in my schedule each week to read what I've stored there. And sometimes the sheer volume of reading material helps me to decide NOT to read something, in which case I usually delete it.

To give you an idea of the way to set up your e-mail folders and sub-folders, I'll share a partial list of the names of mine. The first five folders come with Outlook Express, and the rest were created by me.

- Inbox
- Outbox
- Sent Items
- Deleted Items
- Drafts
- Action Required
- Action Required-Read
- Clients (may have sub-folders with individual names for each client)
- Family/Friends
- Humor
- Inactive Clients
- Lists/Discussion Groups (may have sub-folders for each list you are on)
- Marketing Newsletters/articles (may have sub-folders for each newsletter you subscribe to)
- Orders Placed Online
- Presentations
- Press Releases
- Quotes
- Stock Information
- Templates (a place to file common responses you forward to people)
- Volunteer Work
- Web Site

Once you set up a Folder system, you must get in the habit of moving the contents of both your Inbox and Sent Items to the appropriate folder. In other words, the Inbox is a temporary holding tank until I "open" my mail and F.A.T. it ... that is FILE, ACT, or TOSS. For the items I file, I am selective about what I place in folders. For example, I might move an online newsletter to my ACTION REQUIRED-READ folder. Once I read it, I might delete it, or I might move it to the sub-folder under Newsletters if it's something I want to keep.

Periodically I will review the folders and sub-folders and delete things I no longer need. For example, I will place an e-mail for an online order in the Orders Placed Online. When I receive the e-mail confirmation from the company, I can also place that in the Orders Placed Online folder. Once the item arrives in the mail I usually delete the e-mails about that order. If it's a business expense, I print out the order confirmation and keep it with my business receipts for tax purposes (in case I am audited). Once you've moved messages to the Action Required folder or the Action Required-Read folder, you may need to schedule time to handle these actions on a weekly basis. Anything going into the other folders does not require action by you and is for future reference only.

Kathy Paauw, a certified business/personal coach and organizing/productivity consultant, specializes in helping busy executives, professionals, and entrepreneurs declutter their schedules, spaces and minds. Contact her at orgcoach@gte.net or visit her website at <http://www.orgcoach.net> and learn how you can Find ANYTHING in 5 Seconds --Guaranteed!

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