

Do You Control Your Email or Does it Control You?

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By Adrian Dayton



Busy professionals have no trouble coming up with excuses. Reasons why they can't do marketing, don't have time for business development and can't write or blog. Perhaps my favorite excuse is, "I don't even have time to answer all my email, how can I find time to do one more thing?"

I find this excuse humorous because of the extreme urgency it places on answering every single email we receive. For many professionals, answering emails has taken control of their lives and by default is given a higher priority than almost anything in our workday. This is not only irrational, but it is costing lawyers and their firms money. Here are five ways to break out of this dilemma.

1. Lessons from Tim Ferris

Tim Ferris, author of "The Four-Hour Work Week" has two solutions for this problem. One that is quite extreme and the other is far more practical. First, whenever he is on vacation he has an auto-responder that basically says, I'm out of the country for the next 30 days, any email you send me during this time will be deleted. If it is really important, please send me another email upon my return. Ok, so lawyers can't get away with talking to their clients that way, but Tim's second solution is a more practical one. He calls it "batching." As opposed to checking your email every fifteen minutes, instead find a couple of times each day when you have scheduled to check your email. Its far more efficient to block out an hour of time to check emails, then to interrupt your work every .1 hours.

If you aren't comfortable checking your email so infrequently, try picking a few times a day that are "no email" times. Perhaps the first hour of your day or the last couple of hours of your workday. It is really quite liberating.

Most lawyers have a hard time with this, because they want to be available for their clients the instant they are needed. The problem is that constant checking of the email creates an environment where it is difficult to concentrate.

I also asked my Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn network for tips- here are a few of the good ones I received.

2. Turn off the alerts (from Heather Morse-Geller, Director of Marketing at Barger & Wolen LLP sent to me on Facebook) Go into the settings section on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter and "turn off email notifications." If you are actively using social media, this can save you a lot of time and reduce the distractions. One caveat however, if you turn all of your notifications off, then you need to check in to those same sites fairly regularly, otherwise you may miss important messages. If you are a very casual user of social media, it may make sense to at least leave personal message or private message alerts on.

3. Get your emails into folders as soon as possible (from Barry Boltz, Author and recovering Entrepreneur-oholic, sent to me from Twitter) A variation on this advice is to create custom colors for emails from certain people (i.e., your boss) to help you prioritize what you read. (from Angela Brown, Senior Digital Strategist at Agency Q sent to me on Twitter.) The important part with either of these pointers is to prioritize the messages you receive.

4. Write shorter emails, the problem begins and ends with the writers! (from Nilofer Merchant, Harvard Business Review writer sent to me on Twitter) Ms. Merchant shared with me an outstanding movement of 10 tips to "reverse the email spiral." You can check out the charter, sign it and share it at <http://emailcharter.org/> This is really a fantastic movement because it has 10 ways that creators of email can solve many of the problems of managing email by putting more care into the way they draft messages. Some of the best tips here are: slash surplus CC's, clearly label the topic in your subject line i.e. "low priority" "action required" "charity", also cut contentless responses like "great."

5. Use a task management app (Kevin Aschenbrenner, Public Reputation Consultant at Jaffe PR sent to me through LinkedIn) According to Kevin, “I use Things, which is a Mac-based task management app... it lets me get tasks out of my email inbox and into a list format. What I do is create task entries based on emails, adding details in the notes section. I can set deadlines, etc... I file the emails away in client folders and then when I turn to a particular task I go into the folder to get the email and refresh my memory on what’s needed.”

Conclusion

Keep in mind, nobody cares about your time as much as you do. If you can effectively use just a few of these techniques it will pay off in a substantial way. Save just 15 minutes each day, and you will have two extra weeks a year. Then your biggest problem will be that you no longer have an excuse keeping your from doing business development.

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