

Reasons to Keep the Inbox Empty

by **Steuart Snooks**

— CEO —

Solutions For Success

☎ 0413 830 772 | ✉ steuart@solutions4success.com.au

7 Reasons to Keep the Inbox Empty

Don't you wish you had an **Empty** Inbox?

These days, with ever increasing email volumes, most of us are leaving more and more emails in the inbox.

Surveys of 2928 people from Australian organisations over a past 8 years show that the average number of emails in the inbox is 1362. That's right, each person has 1379 in the inbox! **That's a total of 3,987,506 emails in those 2928 inboxes!** Staggering eh?

It seems that we either don't have the time to address them all, or don't quite know how to make a decision on the action required or where to move them to . . . so we leave them in the inbox. But there are many good reasons why it would be better to keep the inbox empty and this article aims to explain at least 7 of those reasons.

Why not take a look at these ideas and put at least one of them into action so that you feel (and are actually) in more control of your inbox. I'd love to hear your thoughts after considering these ideas.



Stewart

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1 An Overloaded Inbox Causes Stress

The inbox is often filled with a backlog of weeks or months of old work yet to be accomplished, messages that need a reply (including an apology for being so tardy), and irrelevant messages that have to be weeded out.

Even if none of the emails require any action, they are still **'unfinished business'** which require filing or deleting at some point in the future, (either by you or the IT department).

This backlog of unfinished email creates a **'psychological drag'** that slows down your mental clarity and focus. Many people report feelings of being overwhelmed, guilty and **'out-of-control'** - there's often a nagging, subconscious sense you're not keeping up with everything, that your work is never up-to-date; that you're constantly playing **'catch up'**.

How much email causes stress?

In a recent Harris Interactive survey, 94% of people said the most amount of e-mail they can receive before feeling some degree of stress is **50 messages**. So, how many are sitting in your inbox right now? And how does that make you feel?

By contrast, an empty inbox is a delight to look at - it makes you feel empowered, calm, in control and up-to-date. It improves your morale. You have time, energy and mental space for higher priorities, creative tasks and meaningful engagement with colleagues and clients. It also forces you to start thinking about higher priority tasks and activities as you can no longer just keep yourself busy attending to the inbox.



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2 Avoids **Multiple Handling** of E-mails

One of the biggest productivity problems with email is that people read the same email message 2, 3, 5 or even 10 times BEFORE they take action on it! Even then, the message is still often left in the in-box (the same thing often happens with all the various bits of paper handled every day).

As a result, it now takes longer to reply to an incoming e-mail, since so many other messages are already in the inbox awaiting replies. This backlog of e-mail also means it takes longer to find a specific message. Sorting may not help much, since something like a 'sort by sender' may show numerous other, older messages sent by the same person, all sitting in the inbox.

Your time is too valuable!

Your time is **far too limited and valuable** to ever look at any new message more than once! An empty inbox, achieved by learning how to **handle each message only once**, allows you to keep up with your workload, meet deadlines and saves you having to come in early, work through lunch, stay back late or use weekends to **'catch up'** with all your email.

Wouldn't you rather spend time doing the stuff you love outside of work hours, rather than trying to catch up with e-mails you've already read? You can avoid multiple handling of e-mail by using the **4D method** to handle each message only once, get your inbox empty and stay up to date with your workload. Why not start doing this today!



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3 Things are **not** Lost or Forgotten

It's easy to forget important actions and tasks when they're buried amongst so many other messages in your inbox. When you do finally get around to addressing them, it is usually under time pressure with a deadline looming (or already past). At best, important e-mails will require reminders; at worst, they will go undone (thereby negating any benefit of using e-mail for that action item).

Rely on your system instead of your memory

By contrast, when you use the **4D method** to make a decision and take action on new e-mail, it is then moved out of the in-box to a more appropriate place, as follows;

- **DELETE** (if not needed for future reference or as a business record)
- **DEAL** with it (handle immediately if it will take 2 mins or less)
- **DELEGATE** when next action needs to be done by someone else)
- **DECIDE** (choose one of the following)
 - Where – file the email to an e-mail folder or add to current calendar item
 - When – convert email to a calendar item for later action
 - Wait – move to a waitlist folder (with a reminder)

Once one of these actions is taken, the e-mail and its contents now sit in the **appropriate place** until the **appropriate time** you need to address them again. As a result you can safely forget about them – they will return to you (at the appropriate time) instead of you having to remember and then search through the inbox to find them again!

This is a great way to rely upon your system rather than your memory to keep track of all the tasks and activities you have to keep up. Why not start using the 4D approach today and see what a difference it makes?



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4 The Inbox is **Not** Your To-Do List

The inbox is NOT a to-do or task list – email **delivers** tasks.

The inbox is simply a holding place for newly arrived messages. It should be visited on a regular (but not constant) basis with the simple aim of making decisions – sifting, sorting and prioritising the latest batch of incoming messages.

Put a time limit on how long you can spend going through your inbox. Don't get caught up reading articles or viewing videos etc at this time (schedule them for later). Best practice shows that for most people, 4 scheduled blocks of 20-30 minutes each day should be more than enough to turn all your email around within 24 hours.

You need to 'kill off' e-mail to get the in-box empty

Again, the aim of visiting the inbox is to **process** e-mail; to make decisions, not necessarily to respond to each email.

It might help to realise that the word 'decide' comes from the family of words that includes suicide, homicide, genocide etc and essentially means 'to kill off'. So when you don't make a decision about an e-mail, you don't deal with it (or 'kill it off') and it stays in the inbox to be revisited and dealt with again at some time in the future.

The way to 'kill off' e-mail the first time you look at it, is to use the 4D method to **make a decision**. Any e-mail that delivers a task that will take more than approx. 2-5 mins should then be converted into a calendar appointment, rather than a to-do or task list – here's how (and why).

By adding this new task to your calendar, you make a better quality decision about when to get this task done. You integrate into your schedule and balance it with all the other tasks, commitments and workload you are already managing. This way, it can be dealt with at an appropriate, focused, single-tasking time in the future.



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5 Avoids Procrastination and Indecision

A cluttered in-box results from (and also leads to) a lack of decision-making and causes procrastination. When faced with an overwhelming number of decisions to make (eg: an overloaded inbox), we tend to procrastinate and make no decision at all.

We need to learn to make a 4D decision the first (and only time) we look at an e-mail. Once you realise that there ever only ever one of four possible decisions needed for each new message, it becomes much easier to make a decision and then action the e-mail, moving it out of the in-box.

The psychological 'drag' of 'unfinished business' in the inbox

Otherwise, the weight of **'unfinished'** business hanging over your head creates a mental **'drag'** and you carry this sub-conscious, psychological baggage around throughout the day. It's that vague sense of unease so many of us have about what still needs to be done and the feeling that we're not up to date with what's in the inbox.

It also slows you down in other areas of work, cluttering your focus and attention, especially when you need to think deeply, deal with complex issues or be creative.

Your time is too valuable to waste on procrastination!



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6 Avoids Being Interrupted by New Messages

Let's face it, so much of your work these days come in via the inbox. And when you have lots of messages sitting in the in-box, you tend to spend large amounts of time based in your inbox.

But being inbox-based makes it very easy to be interrupted by new, incoming e-mail. These interruptions distract you from the task at hand, dilute your focus, fracture your attention and cause you to start [multi-tasking](#) (which makes you even more unproductive).

This is made even worse if you also get an alert every time a new message arrives - a 'ding', the little yellow envelope and/or the 'pop up' in the bottom right hand corner of the screen.

3 quick ideas to avoid being interrupted by new e-mail;

1. Simply turn off all your e-mail alerts ([click here to find out how](#))
2. Even better, when working on the computer, base your work on what is in your calendar (or task list), instead of in the inbox. This allows you to stay focused on the task at hand which maximises your time, attention and energy so that you are able to complete tasks and activities quicker (and to a higher standard).
3. When processing e-mail, use the [4D method](#) to handle each message only once, leaving your inbox empty after each visit. Most importantly, convert those emails which involve a task into a calendar item so that when you come back to work on them, you're doing so in the calendar rather than the inbox. What's more, you can reply to or forward an e-mail from within your calendar item **without having to go back to the inbox** (and the risk of being distracted by new mail).

Why not try these ideas today and see for yourself what a difference it makes!



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7 There are **More Appropriate Places** to Store Email Messages

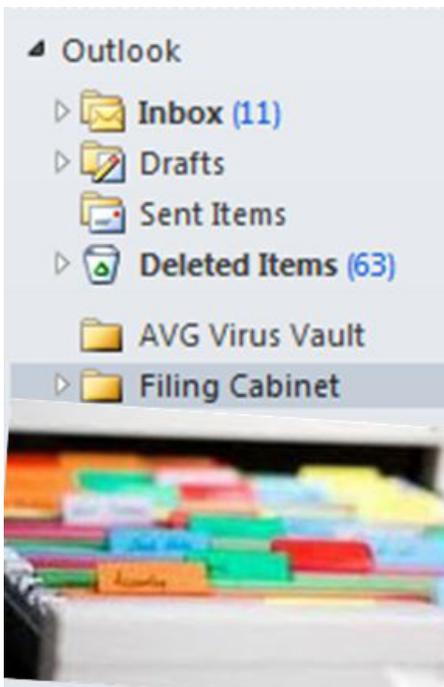
One of the biggest reasons you tend to leave message in the in-box is because you're not sure where else you can store them. You don't want to forget them (or lose them) you leave them in the in-box, just to be safe, but this also creates lots of clutter and distraction.

However, once you get your e-mail folders organised it becomes much easier to move each e-mail out of the inbox.

- If an e-mail is no longer needed, it should be deleted.
- If you do need it again at some time in the future, it can be moved to an appropriate email folder (eg: Subject A, B, C; or Client 1, 2, 3; or Project X, Y, Z).
- If you don't have a folder for a specific e-mail, or you're not sure which folder it should go to, or there's not enough of this type of message to justify its own folder, you can move it to a 'catch-all' folder (eg: called 'Reference' or 'Filing Cabinet' or 'Miscellaneous').
- If you have to hold the message while waiting for someone or something else to happen, it can be moved to a Waitlist or Pending Reply folder. Add a reminder to these messages so you stay in control, just in case the 'someone' or 'something' else doesn't actually happen.
- If the e-mail requires you to perform a task, it should be converted to a calendar appointment, scheduling a block of time at an appropriate date and time in the future to fit in with all your other commitments and workload.

Woo hoo – an empty inbox!

Once you made one of the above decisions about where to relocate each e-mail, the in-box is empty again. Every e-mail is now stored in an appropriate location, rather than left to accumulate in the in-box.



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Find out [More](#)

Why not check out ideas at emaitiger.com.au to get your e-mail folders organised so you can keep your inbox empty and get e-mail under control?

- Is email is central to most of your work?
- Do you feel that email is the biggest time waster & source of frustration in your day?
- Would you like to save an enormous amount of the time & effort you currently spend 'doing email'?

That's where connecting with me might help. I'd like to show you how to master your email & make a real difference to your work and personal life. In fact, more & more clients tell me that what I show them is 'life changing'!

Hi, I'm Steuart Snooks. I work with busy professionals who are struggling to get control of their inbox and master their email. After 10 years as a specialist in this area, I've learnt that email overload is not so much about volume as it is about a lack of a 'process' or a system for managing this critical aspect of everyday workload.

You see, most of us have never been taught how to master the productivity tools we use with our own hands every day. And as our technology delivers ever increasing volumes at faster & faster speeds, it's so important that we learn, right now, how to keep up.

I've found there are **3 key strategies** for mastering email;

- WHEN you check the inbox
- WHAT you do with each message
- WHERE to quickly file and retrieve messages



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If you like, I'd be happy to have quick chat with you about this in more detail. That way, I can get to know you, understand your biggest email challenge(s), give you some advice and discuss options to work together in the future if we are a good fit.

Let's connect

If you're interested, the easiest way to arrange this is for us to jump on the phone for 10-15 minutes. Simply use my on-line calendar to schedule a convenient time for us to hook up.

 [Click to Schedule](#)

I look forward to speaking with you sometime soon!

All the best!



Steuart Snooks

Email Strategist & Productivity Expert

 0413 830 772

 www.emailtiger.com.au

 stuart@solutions4success.com.au

