

Tech Talk: Tips for managing your information overload

By **MJ Shoer**

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In today's connected world, many of us suffer from daily information overload. I've heard horror stories about people who get literally hundreds of new e-mail messages every day. I've seen inboxes with thousands of messages in them. How is one supposed to stay on top of all of this information?

Clearly, spam is one of the largest contributors to this problem. Billions of spam messages traverse e-mail systems every day around the world. Any business that has its own e-mail server must implement a robust spam filter that not only blocks spam from entering its corporate network, but also scans each and every e-mail message to be sure it is not carrying a virus or spyware payload. I'm a fan of systems that do this outside the corporate network, in the cloud. When e-mail flow goes through this type of filter, these nuisance messages and threats are stopped before they even get to your firewall. This has the added benefit of keeping unnecessary traffic off your Internet connection, which will help keep it operating efficiently.

Back to your inbox: Here are some strategies for keeping up with it. Whether you are using an e-mail system in a cloud or an e-mail server at your office, I will focus on some common tools you should have access to. First and foremost, consider organizing your e-mail into logical folders, based on the content or sender. This can serve two purposes: One is to help you organize your messages just as you file other files on your hard drive or those old-fashioned paper files that go into folders in cabinets. The second is to use folders to save information you do not have to act on right away.

One of the real dangers of instant communication is that it distracts you from what you are working on at the moment. E-mail applications, by default, alert you when you receive a new message. When you are deep in thought reviewing an important document or spreadsheet or reading an important article online, all it takes is that little pop-up interrupting you to tell you about the new e-mail that just came in, to take you off task. Your mind may wander or you may not be able to resist the temptation to click that alert and read the message, taking you even further off task. Consider disabling these pop-ups, so you are not interrupted by these.

Even better, consider shutting down your e-mail entirely, when you need to focus and work on something like an important report that is due.

In fact, my e-mail is shut down right now, while I work on this column. It would be rather ironic for me to be offering this suggestion while watching my e-mail at the same time.

Depending on what e-mail program you use, you should also have several tools available to you to help you manage your e-mail more effectively. Most companies use Microsoft Outlook for their e-mail and Outlook has numerous features that help keep your inbox under control.

Rules allow you to deal with messages automatically, based on one or more criteria that you set. For example, you could have a rule that moves messages from certain people to a specific folder related to that person.

This will remove the message from your inbox and place it in that folder. You may then review the messages in that folder at our leisure.

This is an especially useful thing to do with e-mail lists. There are many e-mail lists to which you can subscribe. The trouble with some lists is that they can generate hundreds of message each day. Many lists give you the ability to receive either individual messages or a daily summary of what's been sent. A rule to move list messages into a folder for later reading is an excellent way to deal with this as well.

If you also get your e-mail on a mobile device, features like rules become even more important as it helps manage the volume of e-mail in your inbox, which otherwise would also fill up your mobile device. Most mobile devices also allow you to select folders in addition to the inbox to synchronize, so if you want to have a folder on your mobile device, you may.

Many people also use their inbox as a reminder system. The problem with this strategy is that most of us also do not go back through our inboxes to find all these hidden reminders. Instead, consider turning an e-mail message

into a to-do or a calendar entry. If you need to deal with an e-mail on a particular date and time, turn it into a calendar item so that it will be scheduled for follow-up. If it's less time sensitive, turn it into a task for later action and get it out of your mailbox.

These are just a few ideas on how to help manage the volume of e-mail you get each day. I hope you learned some new ideas that will help you manage yourself out of information overload.

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