Tame your e-mail

This chapter will introduce some e-mail management techniques to help librarians alleviate clogged inboxes. Tips will include inbox task management, filters, message organization systems, dealing with listservs, and smart calendaring. This chapter is brief, but many other authors have offered their e-mail management expertise in books or online. References for some of these works are included at the end of the chapter.

First: give up

If your inbox is filled with thousands of messages and you are seeking to clean it out, you have two options: either process through all the messages, or archive it all and start fresh. With even more messages arriving every day, processing backlogs of messages can be a Sisyphean task. Thomas Limoncelli, author of Time Management for System Administrators (2006), offers a couple of strategies for parsing those messages, including choosing 100 random messages per day to answer, or grouping all messages by person and responding to one person per day. Ultimately, Limoncelli encourages readers to give up on the idea of incrementally emptying a clogged inbox. Instead, he says, it is easier to start fresh by clearing out the inbox and starting at zero. Items that are urgent will re-appear in your inbox, while items that are not urgent will make their way back to your attention eventually, if at all.

Declaring e-mail bankruptcy

An optional component of re-booting your inbox is a public announcement of e-mail bankruptcy. In 2004, Internet guru Lawrence Lessig was one of the first public figures to announce that he would be clearing his inbox and starting from scratch (Fitzgerald 2004). He sent a form e-mail to everyone who had sent him a message, apologized for not writing back in a timely manner, and encouraged people to re-send their messages if they really needed a response.
Second: whittle it down with filters

Filters are the most powerful tool to help maintain the sanctity of the inbox. Most modern e-mail systems have a feature that will perform actions on e-mail messages that meet set criteria. Filters can be used to automatically sort e-mails into folders, forward the messages to other addresses, mark them as important, or send to the trash. The following are some filter recipes that will reduce your inbox to only the most important messages.

Filtering listservs

Many librarians juggle memberships on multiple professional e-mail lists. Luckily, those messages are usually easy to identify because their subject lines contain a “slug” identifying the listserv, or the to: address is always the listserv’s e-mail address. The filter you set up may look like this:

- If message subject contains “[lita-l]”
- Move to folder Listservs\LITA

Or

- If to: address is “lita-l@lists.ala.org”
- Move to folder Listservs\LITA

Clearing listservs from the inbox is a fast way to reduce clutter and allows you to come back to that listserv’s folder at your leisure and catch up on the threads.

*Speaking of listservs: daily digests and listserv bankruptcy*

If you do not see yourself responding to listserv messages regularly, consider switching to a daily digest e-mail for each listserv. Many e-mail lists have a web interface where you can
manage your subscription and set your delivery options. If you are not sure where that management interface may be, try visiting the address that is after the @ sign in the listserv’s email. For example, if the listserv e-mail address is lita-l@lists.ala.org, you can visit the web management page in your browser at http://lists.ala.org.

After a vacation or a busy time at work, you may find that your listserv e-mail folders are filled up with lots of unread messages. Rather than read them all, you can save your time and sanity by simply marking all the messages in the folder as read. Your time is valuable.

Filtering other automated messages

If you get automated alerts from systems, daily digests or other messages that do not necessarily require your immediate attention, you can filter them as well. Example:

- If message subject contains “Tech forum daily digest”
- Move to folder News\Tech Forum

Filtering important messages back to the inbox

Sometimes your coworker or supervisor may respond to or forward an e-mail that would otherwise meet the filter criteria to be moved out of your inbox. Most e-mail systems will allow you to layer or prioritize filters. For example, the rule below could be prioritized above a listserv filter.

- If message sender is my.boss@employer.org
- Move to Inbox
- Make this filter more important than other filters

Inbox as to-do list

Merlin Mann’s concept Inbox Zero (Mann, 2006) is one method of e-mail organization aimed at busy information professionals. The central tenet of Inbox Zero is that the inbox is a to-
do list, and each message should be seen as an action item to be processed and removed from the inbox. According to Mann, each e-mail should receive one of five actions, outlined below.

Delete

Some e-mails can be read or scanned, then sent directly to the trash folder. Such e-mails may include generic announcements, product pitches, and daily news updates that are not directly relevant to your work. Delete them. If the messages are junk, use the “mark as spam” feature.

Delegate

If the content of the e-mail can or should be handled by another person in your organization, forward the message to that person and archive the message.

Respond

Respond to the sender’s request - briefly, if possible.

Defer

If the e-mail presents a task that you can’t perform at the moment, or the task requires more thought, defer action until you are ready. Mann recommends that this action not be used very often.

Do

Perform the action in the e-mail, follow up if necessary, then archive the message.

Limoncelli (2006) recommends a similar step, “record”, in which you add the item to a separate to-do list and file or delete the message.

Mann claims Inbox Zero will help “reclaim your inbox, your attention, and your life.”

Organizing messages
Where do messages go when they leave the inbox? As librarians we may all have distinct methods for organizing e-mail. Organization methods can range from a very complex foldering system featuring multiple levels of folders and subfolders to the simplistic “big bucket” one-folder approach. For some e-mail clients like Gmail, which feature robust search capabilities and encourage users to archive e-mails instead of deleting them, the big-bucket approach can be very easy. For e-mail clients that may be slower to search, a basic foldering system can be a faster approach to managing and retrieving messages. Some common folders librarians may find useful could include:

- Administrative
  - work-related, HR or organizational messages that don’t necessarily pertain to your day-to-day projects
- Committees
  - committee work at your library
- Scholarship
  - papers, presentations, travel plans, external committee work
- Listservs
  - subfolders for each listserv
- Projects
  - subfolders for each large project you’re currently working on
- Dossier/smile file
  - any messages that could be added to your promotion and tenure dossier. This folder can also be a place to put “thank you” or other feel-good messages that you can return to for motivation later.
E-mail like a pro

Learn shortcuts, save time

Advanced software users can shave off a good deal of time by using keyboard shortcuts in lieu of using the mouse. Studying your e-mail client’s keyboard shortcuts for a short time can pay dividends in time saved. To find keyboard shortcuts, look at your client’s dropdown menus to see if keyboard alternates are listed to the right of each command. For example, some e-mail clients’ shortcut for “reply” may be Ctrl+R; reply all, Ctrl+Shift+R. More than likely there are also resources on the web from the software’s vendor or other users who have leveraged keyboard shortcuts to save time.

Keyboard shortcuts are not solely available in standalone e-mail clients; some web-based e-mail clients have keyboard shortcuts, too. If your organization uses Gmail, for example, you can enable keyboard shortcuts in your Gmail account settings. Refresh your memory on shortcuts at any time by typing a question mark ?, which will bring up a dialog listing all available keyboard shortcuts.

Keep it brief and write for scannability

Sending good e-mail is a part of smart inbox management. When composing messages, follow the golden rule of e-mail: write it how you’d like to read it. Though sometimes e-mails cannot always be short, they should be chunked into smaller paragraphs where possible, with bulleted lists used wherever they can be for increased readability.

If you find yourself spending a lot of time composing a message, step back for a few minutes and do something else. When you return to the draft, clarify with yourself the main idea that you are trying to impart and go from there. Don’t rewrite to death. It doesn’t have to be perfect.
Know your contacts

Knowing your co-emailers’ communication habits is part of being an effective e-mail user. For example, if you have a time-sensitive issue to communicate with someone who does not quickly respond to e-mail, you could mention the time constraints in the subject line of the message and follow up with a phone call if necessary. If it’s something that can wait, put a reminder on your calendar to send that person a follow-up e-mail on a certain day in the future - or keep a reminder e-mail in your inbox as a placeholder until the person responds.

Take a break

Constant connectivity at work and in our personal lives can take its toll. Sometimes it is healthy and necessary to simply take a break. Internet researcher danah boyd advocates taking e-mail sabbaticals concurrent with vacations, and offers tips for successful sabbaticals, including announcing the sabbatical ahead of time and creating an auto-reply message during the break (2011).

It’s your inbox

At the end of the day, these tips may or may not get you closer to a comprehensive e-mail management strategy. It is your inbox, after all, and how you manage it is up to you. There is no wrong way to manage e-mail, but there are ways to make it a little less painful.

Works Cited

http://www.danah.org/EmailSabbatical.html


Additional resources


