The Sivv Guide to:

Being Productive

A compendium of the world's best thinking on time management, achieving focus, dealing with email and more

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INTRODUCTION

'It's not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it.'

- Seneca, Stoic philosopher

'Time is what we want most, but what we use worst.'

- William Penn, writer

Your productivity is a measure of how effectively you convert your time, energy and attention into meaningful progress towards important goals. It regulates much of what you do, meaning that any steps you take to enhance it can be highly rewarding. By becoming more productive, you can expand the scope and ambition of your goals, achieve them more quickly or with less effort, and create more time for the things that are truly important.

This guide sets-out a wide range of tips, strategies and research that can help anyone become more productive. It starts by highlighting the importance of establishing priorities, before exploring how you can ensure that you focus on these. Part two looks at how, having determined what you need to do, you can optimise your approach to getting it done. The guide ends by outlining the best ways to manage two of the world's most potent 'productivity killers': email and meetings.

TAMING EMAIL

'The email of the species is deadlier than the mail.'

- Stephen Fry, comedian and writer

Many of us spend a significant portion of our time dealing with email. One study[118] found that the average knowledge worker spends around 28% of their day managing their inbox, while respondents to a survey[119] conducted in 2019 reported spending more than five hours each day checking work and personal accounts. We therefore stand to realise significant productivity gains though improving our approach to composing, screening and processing email.

SEND FEWER EMAILS

One of the best ways to reduce the burden of email is to stop using it for purposes that it is not particularly suited to.

Given its versatility and ease of use, email often becomes the default option for addressing a query, solving a problem or providing an update. As a result, we potentially overlook more effective alternatives. A short call, for instance, is generally preferable to sending multiple back-and-forth messages (and also better for building relationships[121]), while a face-to-face conversation often takes less time than crafting an email that subtly addresses a delicate or particularly complex topic[rr]. Recorded voice memos or photographs are generally quicker to send and more effective than a detailed description. Relative to such alternatives, a message delivered in written form is also more likely to be misinterpreted.

THE HIDDEN COSTS OF EMAIL

The environmental cost of email represents yet another compelling reason to use it less. One recent report[120] found that the UK's carbon output could be cut by 16,433 tonnes a year if everyone sent one fewer email each day. This is equivalent to the carbon emissions that would be produced by 81,152 people flying from London to Madrid. The report estimated that Brits send more than 64 million unnecessary emails every day, including *'unactionable one- or two-word pleasantries'* such as 'thank you', 'have a good weekend', 'you too', 'LOL' and 'received'.

In 'Unsubscribe: How to Kill Email Anxiety, Avoid Distractions, and Get Real Work Done'[122] Jocelyn Glei suggests that we can reduce the time we spend processing email by proactively closing conversations as soon as possible. For instance, instead of emailing someone to ask if they would like to meet for lunch, waiting for a reply, then sending multiple messages back and forth to arrange a date, time and venue, we could instead suggest three concrete options in the initial email and (hopefully) finalise arrangements

[rr] Ensure that your emails include a signature that clearly conveys relevant information such as alternative contact details and your working hours.

with just two interactions. Similarly, in 'The 4-Hour Work Week' Tim Ferriss recommends proactively offering 'if / then' solutions (e.g., *'if you don't like Mexican food, let's meet at the pizza restaurant'*) to avoid the need for multiple messages. When scheduling involves multiple people or appointments, it is generally far more efficient to use a dedicated scheduling tool (such as Doodle polls).

COMPOSE BETTER EMAILS

Even when an email is the right tool for the task at hand, we often send ineffective messages that fail in their objective and spawn more emails as we are forced to follow-up or clarify[ss]. Lengthy emails, for instance, are unlikely to be read fully and, even if they are, take longer to process and risk obscuring your request. As a result, they are more likely to elicit an unsatisfactory response or be forgotten or lost.

Concise messages[tt] that quickly highlight important takeaways or requests (e.g., using bullet points, lists or underlined text) are generally more effective, easier to process and take less time to compose. However, we should be careful that our attempts to reduce the time we spend managing email and efforts to write concise messages do not result in a loss of clarity. Linguist Naomi Baron argues[123] that emails are commonly misunderstood because:

- → Reading from a screen encourages recipients to quickly skim text and look for key takeaways.
- → We have to process such a high volume of messages that most are written in haste and, as a result, end-up being sloppy or confusing.

So, while your emails do not need to be literary masterpieces, properly composing and proofreading the messages you send[uu] will reduce the likelihood of you having to follow-up and clarify, ultimately saving you time and energy.

Similarly, in 'The HBR Guide to Better Business Writing'[124] Bryan A. Garner notes that, while emails should get straight to the point, it may be helpful to start them with a brief greeting or compliment to avoid coming across as cold or indifferent. You may also need to provide a short recap of the relevant details to help the recipient understand your request and respond appropriately.

Ensuring that the subject line of the emails you send is short, specific and compelling will improve open rates and response times. You can also help recipients process and respond to your emails by

[ss] Remember also that emails are easily forwarded and, within companies, often monitored. Never write anything that you would be embarrassed or ashamed for others to see and avoid sending a message while highly emotional (or drunk).

[tt] Some people suggest sticking to a maximum of five sentences or one screen of text.

[uu] See the **Sivv Guide to Effective Communication** on writing.

highlighting any action required or important deadlines in the subject line[vv] (using a format such as: *'[Response needed by 5pm today] Finance report attached for comments'*) and attaching or embedding hyperlinks to any resources that you refer to (meaning that they can be accessed with a single click).

You should also think carefully about who you copy-in when you compose an email and when to use 'reply all'. Group messages can easily spawn tens or even hundreds of (often irrelevant or inane) follow-ups, while it is often unnecessary to keep everyone 'in the loop'. When you are sending an email to multiple people who do not need to communicate with one another, you should therefore consider including recipients using BCC rather than CC. Doing so prevents conversations from expanding uncontrollably ('reply all' is no longer an option) and allows the email addresses of recipients to be kept private. To avoid any suspicion that may arise from the use of BCC (many people view it as tool that facilitates covert monitoring), you can specify who is receiving the message in the body of the email[125].

When sending emails to multiple people, you can also reduce the number of meaningless follow-ups you need to review by making 'no response' the default action[ww] (e.g., by including '*please only respond if…*' or '*no need to reply*' in our message) or specifying what is required of individuals[xx]. Writer and entrepreneur Brett McKay recommends[126] starting the subject line with 'FYI' ('*for your information*') and ending it with 'NRN' ('*no response needed*') to quickly convey this. Prefixes such as 'Request' or 'Important' can also help to catalyse a response.

If replying to an email that includes multiple questions or requests, it is often easier to type responses within the original message (this also reduces the risk of failing to address any of the points raised). Highlighting that you have done so and / or using a different text colour should ensure that your answers are not overlooked.

Yet another mental burden associated with email stems from the need to keep track of pending responses. Business coach Jason Womack suggests[127] that the best way to do this is to 'BCC' yourself

THE MAGIC OF TEXT EXPANDERS

The process of composing emails can be streamlined with the help of a text expander, which is a simple (often free) software tool that enables you to insert a snippet of text by typing a unique abbreviation that you have assigned to it. For example, instead of repeatedly retyping the elevator pitch for your company's latest product across hundreds of emails, you can link the description to the abbreviation 'prodDesc'. When composing an email, simply typing the eight characters of 'prodDesc' will insert the assigned text, saving you both time and effort.

[vv] In some cases, the entire message may fit in the subject line. Consider adding 'EOM' (for 'end of message') at the end of the subject line to confirm that the body of the email has been intentionally left empty.

[ww] If appropriate, you can also make agreement to whatever you are asking for the default response (e.g., '*if I don't hear back from you by 6pm I will proceed*'), which removes the burden of having to track or chase-up replies.

[xx] Requests made to groups rather than individuals tend to be ignored.

into emails that require a response, then transfer the message from your inbox to a dedicated 'follow-up' folder that you regularly review.

SCREEN EFFECTIVELY

It is often possible to realise several 'quick wins' that reduce the number of emails you receive. These include unsubscribing from unwanted newsletters, opting out of social media or app notifications (e.g., emails that inform you when someone has liked, commented or updated something) and reducing the frequency of updates from sources that you are interested in (e.g., subscribing to the 'weekly highlights' email rather than the 'daily digest'). Some services (e.g., Throttle) make it possible to condense multiple newsletters into a single daily email or control when you receive them.

Unwanted emails can be discouraged by creating more friction for prospective senders and diverting queries where possible. For instance, websites can be designed to take enquirers through a short survey and use the information gathered to redirect them to another person or resource (such as a list of frequently asked questions) that can provide an answer to their query. In addition, providing a form rather than an email address on a website allows you to define the structure and maximum length of messages, thus making them easier to process.

'An inbox is the to do list that anyone can add to.'

- Daniel Egan, behavioural finance expert[128]

A more extreme approach involves imposing a 'sender-pays' model in which senders must agree to pay a (relatively small) fee or donation to send an email to a contact that they do not personally know. This approach is designed to reduce the clutter that generic requests create, thus freeing time to focus on more important tasks.

To minimise the time consumed by group emails, some teams nominate one person to screen and synthesise conversations and newsletters[129].

BATCH PROCESS

Email represents a particularly disruptive interruption because it frequently raises issues or creates follow-ups that we cannot immediately resolve. These linger in our minds and make it harder to focus on other tasks. Moreover, breaking away from what you are doing to pay a visit to your inbox often acts as a gateway to other forms of digital distraction, such as checking news sites, social media platforms or messaging services.

As noted above, planning your schedule so that instead of constantly checking and responding to emails you batch-process them during one or two dedicated periods each day (e.g., once before lunchtime and once in late afternoon) allows you to maintain lengthy periods of uninterrupted focus.

Checking emails only when you have specifically allocated time to doing so also makes it easier to process each message in one go, which is generally more efficient[yy]. Perhaps unsurprisingly, research[130] suggests that scheduled email checking reduces stress and improves wellbeing.

Many email services provide a range of functions and tools that facilitate batch processing, such as the ability to navigate directly to the 'compose' screen to avoid being distracted by your inbox (you can achieve a similar result by composing emails in a word processor). Some services also allow outgoing emails to be scheduled in advance, meaning that you can compose them at a time that best suits you but send them when they are most likely to be read or elicit a response.

In 'Never Check E-mail in the Morning'[131] Julie Morgenstern recommends avoiding email for at least the first hour of the working day. Otherwise, she warns, we risk getting caught up with responding to the priorities of other people and losing what is often the most productive part of our day. However, given that many people will assume that we will be constantly checking our inboxes, they may send an email to communicate last-minute or urgent updates. Reflecting this, author Laura Vanderkam recommends[132] conducting a quick inbox scan at the beginning of the day (ideally on your phone during your commute) before turning off notifications and starting to work.

EMAIL HABITS

Unfortunately, many of us develop an email habit, which makes it difficult to adhere to any self-imposed restrictions. Dealing with email makes us feel like we are being productive, while each message provides a reward in the form of novelty or mental stimulation that, over time, we start to crave in certain situations, particularly when at work[zz]. The variable nature of the reward (each message is different) makes email even more enticing. To counter this:

- → Turn-off notifications and disable (or reduce the frequency of) automatic inbox refreshes.
- → Avoid leaving email programmes running in the background when working on other things.
- → Make it harder to check email outside of the times you allocate to doing so, for instance by blocking accounts or maintaining separate devices for work and personal use. Some companies even automatically delay or delete emails sent to staff during weekends or holidays.

Most senders are unlikely to be annoyed by a small delay in receiving a response[aaa]. However, if you constantly respond to emails within minutes of receiving them your contacts will start to expect quick replies and may become frustrated when you fail to deliver. You can manage expectations by setting-up an automated response that advises senders not to expect a swift reply but provides a phone number through which you can be contacted immediately if the matter is urgent. It may also be necessary to set-up an alert that informs you when you receive an email from a priority contact.

[yy] In 'Unsubscribe' Jocelyn Glei suggests that if you receive an important email that requires a significant amount of work before you respond, instead of disrupting your planned schedule to deal with it you should send a quick reply to confirm receipt and set expectations about when you will follow-up.

[zz] See the **Sivv Guide to Managing Habits** for more on this.

[aaa] An excessive delay can, however, make you look unprofessional or disorganised and lead to reciprocal behaviour.

STREAMLINE PROCESSING

Arguably the most frustrating consequence or our email dependency is the time that we are forced to spend dealing with unwanted or irrelevant messages. In fact, one study[133] estimated that around 50% of the time we devote to managing email is spent reading and responding to messages that we should not have received in the first place.

In such cases, we should not feel obliged to respond and can reduce any guilt we feel about ignoring an email (as well as reduce the risk of causing offence) by actively managing the expectations of senders. For example, we can use email signatures or automated responses to:

- → List answers to a number of frequently asked questions and instruct the sender to call or follow-up only if their query is not covered.
- → Thank the sender for their message but inform them that they are unlikely to receive a response due to the high volume of emails that we receive.

Author Matt Gemmell suggests[134] that, if you do not feel compelled to respond to an email, you should simply ignore it until the sender follows-up. If they fail to do so you can assume that the email was not important and that responding would have been a waste of your time.

Alternatively, we can reduce the time and effort required to respond by reusing saved template responses (altered slightly if necessary) to reply to common requests. Saving these as different email signatures makes replying even easier.

YESTERBOX

Managing email is a never-ending process. Even if you manage to get to 'inbox zero', it will almost certainly be a short-lived achievement, in part because many of the emails you send generate more in response. To deal with the daily overwhelm, Zappos founder Tony Hsieh developed an approach called 'Yesterbox'[135], which involves replying only to (non-urgent) emails that you received yesterday.

To implement this approach, Hsieh suggests scheduling time each day to go through yesterday's inbox (allocating more time if you fall behind and when you return from a holiday). He suggests processing yesterday's messages in blocks of 10 before checking today's emails, which you can either delete, file or forward. If a response is needed, unless it cannot wait 48 hours, you should not think about it until the next day (the one exception is if the email is part of an earlier email chain).

While this approach may take time to get used to, it offers several benefits. For one, it means that each day you need to process a limited number of messages, which transforms email from a never-ending task to one that can be completed. Doing so provides a great sense of achievement and relief.

Moreover, it discourages you from procrastinating on responding to difficult or important emails. While responses are not immediate, they are consistent in that they mostly happen within 48 hours.

If an email requires more than 10 minutes to respond to or the response requires some research, Hsieh recommends filing it in a dedicated folder and scheduling a time to process it (including the folder name and email subject line in the calendar entry). This ensures that you will respond but removes the email from your inbox, reducing the anxiety it causes. If you send an email that requires a response, Hsieh suggests that immediately after sending you schedule an appointment on your calendar to check that you have received what you need.

GMAIL SEARCH OPERATORS

Use the following search operators within Gmail to more easily find what you are looking for:

- **from:** (e.g., from: Dave Smith) - specifies the sender.
- **to:** - specifies the recipient.
- **subject:** (e.g., subject: drinks) - searches message subject lines for the specified phrase.
- **has: attachment** - searches for emails with an attachment.
- **filename:** (e.g., filename: budget) - searches for an attachment with the specified name.
- **""** (e.g., "wedding arrangements") - searches for an exact match with the specified phrase.
- **after:** yyyy/mm/dd (e.g., after: 2020/04/20) – searches for messages received after the specified date.
- **before:** yyyy/mm/dd - searches for messages received before the specified date.

THE 3210 APPROACH

In '15 Secrets Successful People Know About Time Management' Kevin Kruse recommends processing email using the '3210 approach', which involves checking email three times a day, each time allocating just 21 minutes to get to inbox zero. This approach is intended to be ambitious in order to force you to prioritise, focus, keep replies short and resist clicking links. For each email, Kruse recommends applying one of David Allen's '4Ds' (discussed above): do (if it will take less than two minutes), delete, delegate or defer.

INBOX ZERO

In 'Lifehacker'[136], Adam Pash and Gina Trapani argue that you should strive to regularly get to 'inbox zero'. As they note, the inbox is not the appropriate place to store most messages (e.g., invites should be moved to a calendar and project files saved to the relevant server folder), while being greeted by a long list of messages each time you check your emailS can be overwhelming and make it difficult to prioritise.

They therefore suggest that you establish a clear demarcation between messages that are incoming and those that have been resolved or are in process. The approach they recommend involves:

- Creating three folders: archive, follow-up and hold.
- Storing anything that you may need in the future within the archive folder.
- Moving messages that require some action into the follow-up folder and adding the action to your to-do list or task management system.

- → Placing anything that you will need to access in the near future into the hold folder, as well as anything for which you are waiting for a response.
- → Regularly reviewing the follow-up and hold folders and removing anything that is no longer relevant. Marking all messages within these folders as 'unread' makes it easy to keep track of the number of outstanding items.

Pash and Trapani also recommend that you:

- → Make a decision on what to do with each email within a day of receiving it.
- → Never leave a read email in your inbox.
- → Avoid spending time to subdivide the archive folder and instead rely on inbox searches to find messages.

MANAGING HOLIDAYS

Email can become particularly problematic during holidays, when many of us face a trade-off between taking time each day to monitor our messages or returning to an overflowing inbox. One way to manage the situation is to use an out-of-office message to set expectations and transfer some of the responsibility back to senders. For instance, this message could convey that you will attempt to respond within a few days of returning but highlight the risk that you may overlook the email and ask the sender to follow-up if you have not responded by a certain date[137]. You may also find that turning-on your out-of-office response a day before going on holiday makes it easier to disengage from ongoing tasks and leave on time[138].

FILTER INTELLIGENTLY

You can also reduce the amount of processing you need to do by automatically filtering, labelling and segregating emails based on topic, sender and frequency of required engagement. Some email services (such as Gmail) make this process easier by allowing email addresses to be 'tagged' by adding a suffix (of the format '+tag') to the username. For example, emails sent to 'user+receipts@gmail.com' will be delivered to the 'user@gmail.com' account, but the tag allows them to be automatically screened and filtered into specific inbox folders. This also makes it easier to search for specific emails and create processes to automatically delete, block[bbb] or forward messages from certain addresses

[bbb] Using a unique email for each service you sign-up to makes it easy to identify the source of any spam email and quickly put an end to it. Alternatively, you could use one of the many available 'disposable' email services, which make it possible to quickly create a unique address for single or time-limited use.

(unlike filtering by the sender's email address, these rules will apply even if the sender uses multiple accounts to contact you).

For example, you could maintain three email folders (one that you check weekly, one monthly and one each quarter) and set-up automatic filters that place emails from certain senders into each. This reduces the amount of processing required on a day-to-day basis while ensuring that time-sensitive tasks are dealt with when appropriate. Alternatively, you could divert emails from key contacts or that are sent only to you (i.e., not group emails) into a 'high priority' bucket or filter all emails concerning a specific project into a dedicated folder, which makes it easier to deal with them only when you are working on that project.

In the 'Art of Life Admin' Elizabeth Emens suggests going a step further to create a secondary email account for purchases that you check only when you need to access a receipt or ticket (thus remaining blissfully unaware of all the marketing emails and spam that you receive as a result of your purchases). Interestingly, investor Marc Andreessen recommends a similar approach for phone calls. He suggests that you should have two phones[ccc] – one for family, friends, your boss and selected co-workers, and one for everyone else – and always answer the first but never the second. Anyone calling the second phone can leave a voicemail, and these can be screened twice per day and batch processed. Alternatively, as Tim Ferriss suggests in 'The 4-Hour Work Week', you can provide your priority number in the non-priority voicemail message, so that the caller can reach you quickly if their query is urgent.

A WORLD WITHOUT EMAIL

In 'A World Without Email'[139] Cal Newport notes that while email can be useful for tasks such as broadcasting information and sending files, it is ill suited to anything that requires back-and-forth interaction.

Unfortunately, however, many organisations operate with a 'hyperactive hive mind' model in which workers constantly engage in unstructured and unscheduled back-and-forth email interactions with colleagues and clients. While back-and-forth collaboration is entirely natural and essential for many tasks, doing it via email has several downsides. For instance, relative to a face-to-face conversation it takes much longer, involves numerous interruptions and leads to more misunderstanding because we are less effective at communicating using text alone. Moreover, the cognitive strain of managing multiple ongoing conversations (including writing, reading and checking for messages) and the constant switching between tasks that this entails is hugely disruptive to our productivity and creativity. The situation is made worse by the fact that we are wired to maintain social networks, so feel compelled to respond quickly to the messages that we receive.

Newport argues that, because autonomy is at the heart of knowledge work, very few organisations seek to impose systems or processes that could discourage the inappropriate use of email. While likely to be met with resistance, initiatives such as adopting a shared task management system in which information is stored in a central repository (as opposed to within multiple inboxes) or establishing protocols around frequently repeated processes could significantly reduce the need for back-and-forth emailing.

[ccc] We can follow this approach with a single phone if we assign different ring tones to priority and non-priority contacts or update our phone settings to divert non-priority calls to voicemail.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE

To be able to fully implement many of these approaches, you are likely to need to at least inform and, in some cases, seek permission from your contacts. For instance, you may need to establish expectations of brevity in order to avoid causing offense, or secure sign-off from your boss to be able to stick to a batched processing schedule. In fact, while you will undoubtedly benefit from embracing these principles as an individual, without a more systemic change to the habits of others in your organisation or network, email is likely to continue to represent a significant time drain. Moreover, any benefits that accrue from improving your approach to email can be largely negated if you supplement it with instant messaging services.

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