

MarketWatch

The scientific way to slash the time you spend on work email by 50%

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And still get everything done, according to experts



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You can become more efficient at work by getting smart about your inbox.

Email doesn't have to be such a huge time suck.

White-collar professionals spend a little over four hours a day dealing with work email, which adds up to more than 20 hours a week, [according to Adobe](#). And [McKinsey calculated](#) that we're dedicating 28% of our work week to the task.

So when I stumbled across [an editorial in the Harvard Business Review written by Matt Plummer](#) — the founder of [time-management research firm Zarvana](#) — about how he'd scientifically determined how workers could cut time spent on email by more than half, I got him on the phone, stat. Here's his research-backed advice on slashing your time on work email by half, as well as other helpful hints from productivity experts and readers who sent us savvy tips.

Consolidate your email into just a handful of folders. Plummer says this is the first thing you should do to slash email time. He recommends just two folders: One for things you need to act on, another for items you just need to read (like newsletters or company-wide information).

Some people may need more than two folders if they receive, for example, customer service tickets that need to be reviewed and processed together (he thinks a max of three is good for most people) — but nowhere near the 37 folders that the average person has that are slowing them down. Besides making it easier to file emails away, it also leads people to use their email application's search bar to re-find emails.

The reason this works: Search is somewhere between 9% to 50% faster than using folders, [research shows](#).

Use keyboard shortcuts and automation to file emails, Plummer says. Dragging and dropping items into the folder takes more time than [keyboard shortcuts](#), [research shows](#). Plus, automate emails into respective folders (for example, make sure newsletters are automatically routed to your reading box) when possible.

"Gmail and Outlook both offer settings that allow the user to label senders to specific destination folders. This reduces the clutter in your main inbox and allows you to get to important senders quickly," says Justin Lavelle, the chief communications officer for online background check firm [Been Verified](#). He adds that you should also mark spam as spam when it comes in so that you don't keep getting it.

Check email once per hour — or less if you can, says Plummer. We tend to check email multiple times per hour (Plummer says it's about 15 times per day, which is roughly twice per hour), but we don't need to. The reason: [Only about one in 10 people expect](#) an email response in less than an hour and if you check every hour, you will almost always be able to respond in that time frame. Just doing this will slash the time you spend on email by 21 minutes every day, Plummer found. Add a calendar notification for when you need to check email so you won't be constantly looking at the clock, which is also a time suck.

Archive or delete emails as soon as you read them — and use a to-do list email integration, says Plummer. Research shows that we spend hours each week re-reading emails we've left in our inbox; so read the emails you get when they come in, and put them in the right folder immediately.

But what about items that require a response but you aren't quite ready to respond yet? Plummer says you should use an integration that syncs your to-do list with your email ([he writes about his recommendations here](#)). This makes it easy to prioritize tasks and puts emails you need to deal with on a to-do list that's prioritized. Otherwise, they're just sitting in your inbox in no particular order and you'll almost certainly respond in an inefficient way.

Turn off notifications, says Plummer. Research shows that it can take more than a minute to get back on track after you get an email notification — not to mention that these notifications will tempt you to check email far more often than you should.

Know when to use email — and when not to. You're part of the email problem — and setting a tone for what's acceptable — when you send emails that are better suited for another platform like a phone call or in-person meeting (consider these options if an email can't be responded to in a sentence or two, and you don't need the response to be in writing). "When something needs to be discussed quickly for decision-making, organize a short online video meeting with key project members," recommends Yi He, CMO of [Binance](#).

Watch your use of the "reply all" and the "cc." "Stop using 'reply all' as the rule rather than the exception," says [Dianna Booher](#), author of the forthcoming book "Faster, Fewer, Better Emails: Master the Volume, Reduce the Stress, and Love the Results!" And state directly when you do not expect a reply, she adds. And don't cc people who don't truly need to be on the email, says Laura Gonzales, the marketing manager at [Mercedes-Benz of Coconut Creek](#) — or else you can expect responses that suck up your time to read.

Outsource it. Sometimes your time is money, so some business leaders like Gene Caballero, the co-founder of lawncare firm [GreenPal](#), hire someone to deal. "Receiving over 500 per day, I knew that getting a virtual assistant was inevitable," he says. He hired someone off Upwork.com and says that though "it took about 2 weeks to teach her exactly what to do," now "it's running like a well-oiled machine" in which the assistant "filters what I need to respond to and will answer some of the easy emails for me." And, he says that a virtual assistant is much cheaper than a full-time, in-office one.

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