

## Introduction

Fifty years ago, Ray Tomlinson sent the first email from one Digital Equipment Corporation DEC-10 computer to another DEC-10. By 2023 the number of emails being sent *per day* from business and home computers globally is estimated to be 347.3 billion.

## Benefits

Emails have transformed our ability to communicate quickly and effectively:

- Rapid delivery compared to traditional post
- Accessible 24 hours a day, 365 days a year
- From any computer globally that is connected to the internet
- Sent to one or many people
- Effectively free.

## Disadvantages

In the absence of constraint email overload is now an epidemic (McKinsey Global):

- An office worker processes around 121 emails daily
- The number of emails in inboxes ranges from zero to 100,000
- There is an untested expectation that a response to an email must be immediate
- It is insidiously easy to hide out in emails.

## Impact

Email overload creates unhelpful urgency for little or no value, increasing stress levels, reducing focus, and dragging good brains and valuable time away from quality work:

- The average employee spends 13 hours a week reading and responding to email
- 62% of emails are not important and that percentage is increasing
- It takes 64 seconds to recover from an email, draining productivity.

## Key success factors to clearing emails to zero

- Be ruthless – cull all but the essential, turn notifications off, unsubscribe from all but what is relevant for your role, have your computer open to your calendar
- Be judicious – send less, be clear about the reason you're emailing, avoid wholesale 'copying in', be brief

- Be authentic – avoid using your inbox as your to-do list, notice when you’re hiding out in emails, use email overload as a reset signal, train others (so you receive less).

## Preparation

Bring no judgement to this work, rather enjoy the satisfaction that comes from it.

1. Assess how much time you need to clear to zero, diary that time in your calendar
2. Set up a filing structure\*
3. Find a quiet place to clear the backlog.

## Guidance

1. How old is this email?
2. In all honesty are you likely to refer to it in the foreseeable future?
3. Can you access it another way if you delete it and end up needing it\*?
4. If you’re not 90% sure you need it, dispose of it<sup>1</sup>
5. Understand your email searching and retrieval system and any archiving policies.

## Process

1. **Measure:** gauge the number of emails and a sense of the general themes.
2. **Minimise:** give yourself a deadline to ruthlessly cull everything but the emails essential for your role.
3. **Migrate:** those you want to keep to your filing system\*
  - **Pending:** things you are waiting on from others
  - **People:** meetings with people
  - **Projects:** work in progress
  - **Personal:** include positive feedback
  - **Process:** internal administration.
4. **Maintain:** check and clear to zero at least weekly, ideally daily.

## Culling hacks

- Establish a holding file if you’re unsure about what to keep: if you haven’t accessed it in 12 months delete
- Delete all emails that are older than e.g., 12 months
- Notice any anxieties and sense check them
- Capture the feeling of achievement when complete.

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<sup>1</sup>Greg McKeown: <https://gregmckeown.com/about/>



## Further reading

For further reading, please [click here](#).