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# Detox your **inbox**

In the third of her six-part series on physical, emotional and psychological clutter, Johannesburg life coach Kate Emmerson explains how **gaining control of your email could free up your time and increase your energy.**

**B**eep, beep! Brrr! Ping! Laptops, iPhones and Blackberries scream, vibrate and flash at us incessantly. It's the soundtrack to a modern guilt trip, which has us jumping from computer to cellphone, incapable of leaving a message unanswered (or, for that matter, completing a task).

Of course, these attention-seeking devices have given us great freedom and flexibility. But they've also conned us into believing that we absolutely have to be available 24/7 – or else. This belief strokes our egos by making us feel important and necessary. But it also creates immense pressure to respond immediately to all requests, whether business or personal.

One of my clients, a very successful sales director, would never delete a single email. When the number of mails hit about 4,000, she simply started a new inbox. This practice is not uncommon, but it does leave us feeling we're never quite on top of things, and it means we waste valuable time searching for old messages. Whatever your current habits, it is possible to start a new system using the following five steps. Remember, technology should support your work life – not control it!

## 1. Clean your slate

Create a new email folder, naming it with today's date. Move your entire inbox to that new folder – simply click and drag. It will feel simultaneously

terrifying and incredible to have such a clean slate. Remember you can retrieve and read any of your old emails in that temporary folder. Great – so what happens next?

## 2. Power process

From now on, every single time you open a new email, get into the habit of processing it at once. (Read that again!) Start at the top of the new batch of mail using the following rules:

**Do it:** If you can reply to a message in less than 20 seconds, do so.

**Ditch it:** Love your delete button (see step 3, 'Be ruthless', below).

**Defer it:** If email will take more than 20 seconds to action, defer it to your 'to do' list. These mails can stay in your inbox. The moment you've sorted through all your mail, you can then get cracking on these tasks.

**Delegate it:** Can someone else deal with the request? If so, pass it along immediately. Ask to be kept out of the loop whenever possible, so that others only copy you in on email you really need to read.

## 3. Be ruthless

If you can delete a mail, get even smarter by assessing its origin. It takes approximately five seconds to unsubscribe from the newsletters that bombard us. Decide how many of these are really useful, and set up a 'newsletters' folder so that they don't get in the way. Once a week, read them over a cup of tea.



**Work:** Tell people when you don't need to be copied in on every single mail. If a mail is going back and forth more than twice, use the phone.

**Friends:** Ask friends not to clog your inbox with junk. Use other social media networks for personal correspondence.

**Junk mail:** If lots of email is junk then improve your junk filter, your spam blocks and your on-line security.

#### **4. Ration your checks**

Every time we start one task then switch to another, we take a full 20 minutes to refocus, often longer. Unfortunately, we simply don't multitask effectively; we may think we're able to do several things at once, but the cost to our

productivity is high. Let go of the need for constant connection by spending between 10 minutes and one hour focusing on your email every day. Then close your inbox and get on with your day. Try it for one week and see how much more you're able to achieve. You will check and process mail less often, leaving more time for your real 'to do' list.

#### **5. Clean up**

Take 20 minutes daily to clear your old emails – the ones you moved into a new folder. Give yourself one week to clear it out completely.