

## PRODUCTIVITY ROAD TEST

# Exit via the inbox

Drowning in email? It doesn't have to be that way, writes **Sue White**.

In a world where most of us are swimming our way through an endless onslaught of emails, the concept of "inbox zero" seems on par with other workplace myths, such as the non-jamming photocopier or the empty office fridge. Sure, some say an empty inbox is possible, but who really has the proof?

As of recently, I do.

In the absence of accepted protocols regarding email (How quickly do I need to reply? Do I really need to answer everything?) most of us seem resigned to our fate: inbox hundreds. But after drowning in emails since Mark Zuckerberg was in nappies (or does it just feel like that?), I recently decided to take the inbox by the horns.

Step one was finding a method. I'm not the first to attempt an empty inbox – writer, speaker and broadcaster Merlin Mann was on to this in 2007, when he gave a talk to the email-overloaded staff at Google (ah, the irony). His 30-minute presentation (see [inbox-zero.com/video](http://inbox-zero.com/video), or find it on YouTube) has changed my workday for the better.

The reality is, getting to inbox zero (or, I confess, inbox zero to five) takes time. But not much. After watching Mann's video (which is, including the Q&A, one hour long), I invested about four hours to create email filters, unsubscribe from lists and figure out a strategy.

Start by seeing how success looks: dump all existing emails in a folder labelled "To process". Work your way through the contents during the

week using Mann's suggestions of delete, delegate (love those), respond, defer and do. Or amend these categories to suit yourself. Then, delete the "To process" folder.

Previously, I'd ignored the existence of filters, but using these has changed my inbox forever. Are you important to me? Your messages now land in the "important" section of my inbox with a star against your name. Semi-interesting updates I'm still undecided about? I've prob-

ably filtered you straight to the bin. Sorry.

Practical changes will get you started, but staying on top of inbox zero requires a new approach. I don't check email any more. Instead, I "process" email to zero in 10-minute "email dashes", done as infrequently as I can cope with. For me that's about once an hour. Remember, email dashes are for fast answers.

If an email requires a long answer, get it out of your inbox and onto your "To do" list. After this I spend the rest of the hour on, wait for it, real work. Inbox zero has also helped me sort out a few other issues.

Scrolling up and down a list deciding what to reply to? Mistake! The action doesn't happen here; email is just a place to store stuff. When should I end the never-ending "thanks" cycle? Soon. (Hey, someone has to be the first to hang up.) When can I use a template for a repetitive email task? More often than you'd think; I keep mine in my drafts and paste them into replies as needed.

Keep inbox zero up for a month and you'll get even more ruthless. More filters, more unsubscribes. And more zero-inbox days. Or at least, far fewer inbox hundreds ones.

Sue White is interested in productivity, working sustainably and having a life outside her inbox. Follow @suewhitewriter.

