

# Optimizing Email: Stay Productive, Not Busy

By Kevin Lawrence, Business Coach  
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Does email boost or hinder your performance? It all depends on how you use it.

Email offers us countless ways to save time and be more productive, but when we go on “email autopilot” – checking the inbox repeatedly, typing out messages that should be discussed, copying people who are only peripherally involved, and other bad habits we’ve picked up along the way – email can make us more busy than productive.

The problem with email is when we don’t contain it; our field of attention becomes fragmented. When attention is constantly shifting over to email, one’s ability to focus on work is severely compromised. The interesting thing is, professionals rarely recognize the degree to which email hampers performance.

In 2005, a psychiatrist at King’s College in London administered IQ tests to three groups: the first did nothing but perform the IQ test, the second was distracted by email and ringing phones, and the third was stoned on marijuana. Not surprisingly, the first group did better than the other two by an average of 10 points. The emailers, on the other hands, did worse than intoxicated people by an average of 6 points.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, in a recent survey of 320 professionals, 17% check a few times per hour and 68% check email more or less continually – constantly breaking their focus on the primary task at hand.

Thanks to the Blackberry and other portable devices, millions of people can’t go more than five minutes without checking email... and we’re doing it everywhere we go:

- In bed - 23%
- In class - 12%
- In business meetings - 8%
- At the beach or pool - 6%
- In the bathroom - 4%
- While driving - 4%
- In church - 1%

There’s a very good reason that “crackberry” was declared the 2006 Word-of-the-Year by Webster’s New World College Dictionary. Blackberry addiction was labeled “similar to drugs” in a recent study by Rutgers University.<sup>2</sup>

Eight out of 10 admit using computers or other gadgets at bedtime and one-third of people make phone calls and send or receive messages in bed. One in five check social networking sites such as Facebook, play computer games or listen to MP3 players.<sup>3</sup>

Are these gadgets improving our productivity and quality of life, or just keeping us compulsively busy?

Many global firms in Zurich don’t allow their bankers to check email more than twice per day. The reason? The more they check email, the more compelled they feel to send email. This highlights the unscalable nature of most time management

<sup>1</sup> “Can’t Get No Satisfaction,” *New York Magazine*, Dec. 4, 2006

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fourhourworkweek.com/blog/out-sourcing-life/>

<sup>3</sup> “When gadgets drive you apart,” Robin Yapp, *The Telegraph Group Limited*, London 2008

approaches: striving to do more just produces increasingly more to do.<sup>4</sup>

In order to streamline your email process and make it as efficient and effective as possible, here are 13 strategies to consider:

1. Turn off the audio alert for your email inbox, and even better, when you aren't actively emailing, turn off your email program.
2. Check email 2-4 times per day at designated times. Communicate to those around you that you now check email a couple times a day, and if something critical arises, they should call you directly.
3. For each incoming email, there are only 5 choices: handle it immediately; forward/delegate it; file it; flag it for later follow-up; or delete it. Don't let messages pile up in your inbox or they will be ignored.
4. Address the message to someone if they need to take action; only cc someone if they need to be aware of the information you're sending.
5. Make only one request per email, and discuss one main idea per paragraph or section. Then specify the response you want (i.e. a phone call, follow-up or appointment).
6. Never leave the subject line blank; use it to quickly inform the recipient about the message content, level of urgency and response required. For example: "Info on the XYZ Company deal – please review for accuracy and reply by 3 p.m. today."
7. Remember, email is intended to be short. Consider adopting a 3-4 sentence standard, plus attachments when necessary.
8. Establish a company-wide policy against messages that say "I got it" or "thanks."
9. Establish or circulate your company's retention/deletion policy. How long should

messages be stored? What are the criteria to keep a message? What are the criteria to delete?

10. Create a "to read later" folder for newsletters, education, and other low-priority messages. File them when they arrive, then go through them in batches when time permits.
11. Don't write an email when it would be faster to pick up the phone (*hint*: this is more often that you think).
12. Avoid expressing anger or chastising someone in an email; you're better off talking face-to-face or by phone. That way you can vent and make an impact without the corrosive effect of written words that can be read over and over again.
13. If a lengthy response is required but you can't answer immediately, send a reply indicating that you received the message and when you will respond fully.

### Coach Kevin's Challenge: Choose 3 Strategies

People waste so much time and energy (in business and life) that could be better invested in higher-value activities. If each of us could free up even a half hour a day by using these ideas, we'd all be a lot better off.

Decide on three steps you will take or changes you will make to streamline your relationship with email and use it more effectively.

No matter how you decide to optimize e-mail practices in your company – and I certainly hope you do, because it's a huge opportunity to improve – the most important point is to be sure everyone is on the same page. When every team member adheres to higher standards of email conduct, the amount of time saved collectively can be astonishing.

<sup>4</sup> <http://lifehacker.com/tag/information-overload/>

## About Coach Kevin



Kevin Lawrence is a business coach, speaker and agent of change, who is driven by a relentless passion for helping entrepreneurs and business leaders get what they really want, in business and life. He deeply believes that entrepreneurs can have tremendous professional success along with an enriching, adventurous and fulfilling lifestyle, taking a 'have your cake and eat it too' mentality to an entirely new level.

With more than a decade of hands on experience as a business coach to hundreds of entrepreneurs and business leaders across Canada and the United States and the Middle East, Kevin is an expert at helping clients overcome major obstacles, deal with tough decisions and capitalize on new opportunities to achieve breakthrough results. His strategies, style and savvy approach have helped his clients increase revenue, profitability and productivity; build higher caliber teams; attract ideal (and eliminate headache) clients; and, reduce stress levels and hours worked so that they are freed up to live their personal version of outrageous quality of life.

For more information, visit [www.coachkevin.com](http://www.coachkevin.com) or call 1-877-564-6224.

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### Submissions & Questions:

We welcome your submissions, questions and success stories.  
Please forward them to [Janice@CoachKevin.com](mailto:Janice@CoachKevin.com).