

EMAILS: THE IMPORTANCE OF ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE FOR DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

By Rowan Caffull



Emails have become a standard form of communication within the professional sphere. It is estimated that over half of the world's population will be active, daily email users by 2022. As a generalisation, we have become governed by this convenient, quick, and easily trackable method of sharing information. But how then, do we begin to wade through our ever-increasing inbox and bring structure to this overflowing stream of information?

As COO of a successful barristers Chambers, I receive an average of 1500 emails per week. Whether this is normal or excessive, I am yet to discover. What I do know is that my inbox keeps me busy for many hours each day. To combat this, I have spent an equally inordinate amount of hours attempting to organise my mailbox to make it more efficient. My subfolders far outnumber my weekly mail list and they continue to grow daily.

It seems that email receivers fall into two categories - those that will happily let unread notifications increase far beyond the thousands and those who must attend to every email immediately. I, for one, fall into the latter category. The sound of an email ping is enough to throw

me off any professional conversation, causing my fingers to twitch in anticipation of organising it away. Sadly, checking my emails is likely the first thing I do every morning and the last thing I do at night. I struggle to understand how anyone can work productively in any other way.

Improving productivity with good organisation

If there is one book I would class as essential reading for everyone in Chambers, it would be Graham Allcott's masterpiece - How To Be A Productivity Ninja. Within the dedicated email chapter, he expertly states that 'Your inbox is not your To-do list, it is just a place where your emails land.' How, if you have 2000 unread emails in your mailbox, can you hope to keep track of priorities or direct your attention to where it is needed?

My email inbox has 0 emails in it, several times a day. The visual celebration that Outlook gives me when I achieve this is enough to make it a daily goal. I find comfort knowing that every digital correspondence has been dealt with or filed away with a structured plan on how to address its contents. For me, this is the digital version of 'Tidy desk, tidy mind.'

Graham Allcott goes on to explain how an empty inbox is entirely possible with a simple paradigm shift:

*Stop checking your emails,
start processing your emails.*

Allcott writes, 'Every time you open your inbox, your mindset should not be to check what's new but to make the decisions and create the momentum needed to move those emails to where they need to get to.' For me, this comes into play every single day. All emails that land in my inbox are dealt with in one of four ways:

- Needs to be dealt with now
- Needs to be dealt with later
- Needs to be noted and filed
- Needs to be deleted

I clearly remember, as a young junior clerk, having the notion that every task needed to be completed before I could leave a day's work drilled into me. My drive to succeed and please my first ever Senior Clerk meant that I would do everything and anything to ensure my To-Do list was clear and my desk was tidy before I walked out the door.

Unfortunately, this just isn't feasible in my current role. Many projects I work on won't be completed for months. However, that desire to leave behind a clear desk at the end of the day remains and has now moved into the digital space, through my emails. The simple task of organising each correspondence into one of the 4 categories above relieves my stress levels, improves my productivity, and ensures that nothing is missed.

I truly believe that everyone should do it. Today.

Mailbox organisation at The 36 Group

Understanding the importance of structured email management has long been a priority for us here at [The 36 Group](#). We have invested time, rolling out software such as MS teams, in an attempt to drive down internal email traffic. This, paired with a mutual understanding of the importance of a digital filing system allows us to deal with mail efficiently and effectively. We are not yet masters but we are proactively making changes.

It is unlikely that my colleagues will see a dip in the number of communications that filter in as a result of these. Indeed, it is part and parcel of running a successful and thriving barristers Chambers. But implementing standard methods and recognising their benefits gives us the tools to ensure that mail is prioritised, approached, and dealt with in a professional manner.

From my own experience, an efficient email system is best supported by other tools. Places to manage tasks and projects. Spaces to collaborate and keep lists - I am personally a big fan of lists. In my next article, I will discuss one such tool that has had a significant impact on productivity for me on a professional and personal level.

In the meantime, I would highly recommend getting your hands on a copy of Graham Allcott's *How To Become A Productivity Ninja*. And, in the even closer meantime, I will leave you with these from Graham Allcott:

'Productivity is the ability to achieve what you want to achieve, for the least effort.'

'Work smarter, not harder'